

# Chapter 2

## Germany: 1918-1939

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### INTRODUCTION

It was only in 1919 that Germany experienced genuine democracy for the first time. The democratic experiment was to fail, however, and in 1933 there occurred a return to authoritarian rule – this time under Hitler and his Nazi Party. He would go on to pursue an aggressive foreign policy which, in 1939, resulted in the outbreak of the Second World War.

To help it succeed, democracy needed an extensive period of stability and prosperity. This it never got. Instead, democracy became increasingly unpopular and was blamed for a succession of major crises which were to engulf Germany, culminating in the Great Depression that began in 1929. Militaristic tradition also contributed to a fairly continuous background of political violence: it ensured a steady supply of ex-soldiers who were keen to take to the streets to smash rivals, typically in the name of one or other of the official political parties.

The collapse of democracy in Germany was not inevitable, but became more likely as the Weimar Republic encountered crisis after crisis. These were made worse by the unwillingness of politicians to work together to achieve compromise solutions. Nor was the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor inevitable. There were other possibilities open to President Hindenburg: his appointment of Hitler on 30 January 1933 was a blunder, undertaken on the advice of advisers driven by petty jealousies and concerned to stop rivals getting that key position. They failed to realise the extent of the threat that Hitler represented.

Once in power, the Nazis set about ensuring they retained it. Terror was used against political opponents. But Hitler's hold on power was also due, to a very significant degree, to his immense popularity, the product of a string of achievements attributed to him personally by Nazi propaganda. The defining characteristic of Hitler and his movement was racism. It dominated Nazi plans. Their ultimate aim was to establish a 'national community', a *Volksgemeinschaft*. In the process of establishing it, those considered biologically unfit or judged racial enemies were to suffer enormously. Hitler's racial agenda was also the fundamental cause of World War II.

### BACKGROUND

Germany lacked experience of genuine parliamentary democracy. Established in 1871, due largely to the scheming of the ruthless Prussian politician Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), the German Empire concentrated considerable power in the hands of the Kaiser and those he appointed government ministers. The revolutionary writer Karl Marx would describe the new state as a 'bureaucratically constructed military despotism, dressed up with parliamentary forms, mixed in with an element of feudalism'. During the course of World War I, political power became ever more concentrated. As the war progressed, Kaiser Wilhelm II was reduced to a mere symbol. So willingly did he go along with the military's proposals that, in effect, he forfeited his power to the Army High Command. From late August 1916 Chief of the General Staff, Paul von Hindenburg, together with his chief of staff, Erich Ludendorff, ran Germany as a military dictatorship.

Previously, during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, militarism had played a crucial role in the creation of the German Empire, and most Germans had grown to accept the use of military force as a legitimate means of achieving nationalist outcomes. Having achieved a position of considerable prestige in the mind of the public, the German military would continue to exert much influence, both direct and indirect – and can be judged a significant factor in undermining German democracy. For example, the vast majority of public servants had served previously in the German army, and carried with them militaristic values. One consequence was that an arrogant police force, recruited mainly from ex-soldiers, would view those German citizens who sought to exercise their civil right to

demonstrate in street marches as if they were enemies of the state; anyone associated with the Communist Party the police considered no better than a criminal. A most significant example of the influence of militarism would take the form of the uniformed squads organised by Germany's political parties during the 1920s. Prominent within their ranks were ex-soldiers. Their official purpose was to safeguard political rallies but they involved themselves increasingly in bloody street brawls against squads of rival parties. Because of such ready resort to violence, especially during the early 1930s, the democratic process would be increasingly undermined.

In late September 1918, with crushing defeat looming and bending to Allied demands, the military had abruptly handed over power to the *Reichstag* politicians, and with it the enormous burden of negotiating a peace settlement. Yet it was Germany's military leadership which had contributed significantly to the decision to go to war in 1914, and it was also that leadership which presided over their nation's approaching defeat. It was unwilling to accept responsibility for what it had done. It passed that responsibility on to civilian politicians who, until then, had exercised little control over how the war had been run. But when those politicians agreed to the inevitable, to a peace settlement which for most Germans was totally unforeseen and grossly humiliating, they would be accused by the likes of Ludendorff and, later, Hitler of having 'stabbed Germany in the back', of betraying the nation when its army remained undefeated. Thus, from its foundation, the new democratic system of government was burdened with guilt. And, for many Germans, it would never achieve legitimacy. The Army's support for the Republic would be, at best, qualified. In March 1920, for example, when the elected government was under severe pressure as a result of an attempted coup by the nationalist Wolfgang Kapp, army chief General Hans von Seeckt refused to support the government.

## KEY FEATURES AND ISSUES

**Successes and failures of democracy:** Parliamentary democracy operated from 1919. One of its greatest achievements was the introduction of an advanced social welfare system. However the onset of the Great Depression caused such insurmountable problems that democracy became unworkable.

**Nature and role of nationalism:** The notion of loyalty to the nation had been particularly influential since Bismarck's wars of unification in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. The prospect of strengthening their nation by military means, and of it achieving greater status as an international power, had enormous appeal to Germans – even if it meant loss of civil liberties.

**Influence of the German army:** Because of the part it had played in achieving German unification, the army was held in very high regard. Serving and former soldiers would seek to exploit that prestige by interfering in the political process, with varying success. But Hitler proved more than a match for the generals. In the long term he turned the army into an instrument for the achievement of Nazi objectives.

**Nature and influence of racism:** Europe had a centuries-long history of anti-Semitism which Germans shared. As a result of the strongly racist Nazi Party assuming power in 1933, anti-Semitism achieved the status of official government policy. Its implementation became ever more radical and violent.

**Changes in society:** The Nazis exploited the widespread distress caused by the Great Depression with the promise to establish a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a 'national racial community', which would abolish traditional class divisions, and in which everyone would be well looked after. The promised social revolution never occurred. Whatever social changes did occur were brought about by racism and the destruction caused by military conflict.

**The nature and impact of Nazism:** Nazism was essentially a mixture of extreme nationalism and extreme racism. Its long-term legacy was an enormous death toll and mass destruction.

**Aims and impact of Nazi foreign policy:** It could be argued that the Nazis simply continued a policy of aggressive territorial expansion begun by earlier German governments. What made Nazi foreign policy different was the addition of specifically racist objectives. Hitler's foreign policy eventually attracted the opposition of Britain and France, resulting in World War II.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1918 9 Nov., Kaiser Wilhelm II fled from Germany.  
30 Dec., foundation of German Communist Party (KPD).
- 1919 5 Jan., National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party founded.  
15 Jan., government forces murdered leading Communists Rosa Luxemburg & Karl Liebknecht.  
19 Jan., election of National Assembly.  
11 Feb., National Assembly convenes in city of Weimar; Ebert becomes first President.  
13/17 March, Kapp Putsch.  
28 June, Germany signed Treaty of Versailles.
- 1920 13 Jan., 42 left-wing demonstrators killed in front of Reichstag in Berlin.  
6 June, 'Weimar Coalition' parties lose heavily in Reichstag elections.
- 1921 29 Jan., Hitler elected leader of Nazi Party
- 1923 11 Jan., French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr.  
Aug., hyper-inflation well under way.  
8/9 Nov., Hitler's failed 'Beer Hall' Putsch in Munich.  
15 Nov., new currency introduced.
- 1924 1 April, Hitler sentenced to 5 years imprisonment.  
29 August, Dawes Plan.  
20 Dec., Hitler released from Landsberg prison.
- 1925 27 April, Hindenburg elected President.  
27 Nov., Locarno Treaty.  
8 Dec., publication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.
- 1926 8 Sept., Germany admitted to League of Nations.
- 1929 25-9 Oct., Wall Street Crash, the symbolic beginning of the Great Depression.
- 1930 27 Mar., fall of last government with a majority in *Reichstag*.
- 1930 30 June, last Allied troops evacuated from Rhineland.
- 1932 10 April, Hindenburg re-elected President.
- 1933 30 Jan., Hitler appointed Chancellor.  
27 Feb., Reichstag fire.  
23 Mar., Enabling Act.  
5 Mar., Nazis won 288 seats (43.9%) in Reichstag election.  
14 Mar., Enabling Law.  
1 April, Boycott Day when Nazi squads stopped Jewish businesses from trading.  
1 May, because of the rush to join, suspension of new membership for Nazi Party.  
8 Jul., Concordat signed with Catholic Church.  
14 Oct., Germany left the League of Nations.
- 1934 30 June, 'Night of the Long Knives' when Nazis murdered about 200, including the SA leadership.  
19 Aug., Germans vote to approve Hitler combining Presidency and Chancellorship.
- 1935 16 Mar., Germany reintroduced conscription.  
15 Sept., Nuremberg Laws made marriages and extra-marital sexual relations between Jews and Germans a crime.
- 1936 7 Mar., German reoccupation of Rhineland.  
August, Olympic Games held in Berlin.
- 1938 3 Feb., Hitler appoints himself Supreme Commander of armed forces.  
12 Mar., *Anschluss* of Germany and Austria.  
29 Sept., Munich Conference agrees to German occupation of Sudetenland.  
9 Nov., *Kristallnacht*, 'night of broken glass', during which at least 100 Jews were murdered and almost 200 of their synagogues destroyed. This was followed by the mass arrest of Jewish men.
- 1939 13 Aug., German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact.  
1 Sept., German invasion of Poland.  
3 Sept., British and French declaration of war on Germany.

## TOPIC OUTLINE

### 1. THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

#### THE EMERGENCE OF A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

In November 1918 there began what historians term a 'revolution' in Germany. This started with a widespread protest movement, fed by war weariness and demanding extensive reforms. On 9 November it was announced that Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated and that a National Assembly was to be elected to draw up a democratic constitution. Some of the protesters had wanted to go much further – to replace the army with a revolutionary militia, nationalise industry and remove from their positions key public servants and judges, whose loyalty remained with the old conservative order. Of the prospects of a violent revolution, however, that would drastically change the social and economic foundations of the nation, the pragmatic leader of the Social Democratic Party, Friedrich Ebert (1871-1925), declared 'I don't want that, indeed I hate it like sin'.

Hence, the revolution would be restricted to relatively modest reform of the political system, and not become anywhere near as radical as those protesters with communist sympathies wanted. Subsequently, they demonstrated their discontent on a number of occasions. Between March and May 1920, for example, a 50,000 strong Red Army operated in the Ruhr industrial region but was repressed and nothing was achieved. In the process, in excess of a thousand of its members were killed, most after being taken prisoner and 'shot while trying to escape' – executed by demobilised soldiers, formed into so-called Free Corps (*Freikorps*) units, with the backing of the regular army and approval of the Social Democrats. As the first President of the new German Republic, Ebert issued a decree which was backdated to authorise these murders. (Thereby government authorities embarked upon a course which would often see them largely ignoring illegal actions carried out by right wing extremists – whilst suppressing any perceived threat from the left. Indeed Ebert had helped establish a precedent which would prove decidedly detrimental to the fortunes of the new Republic as it sought to establish itself.)

Elections for the National Assembly were held on 19 January 1919, with 423 deputies being elected. Those political parties supporting a program of moderate

reform – the Social Democrats, the Centre Party and the German Democrats – received a very solid majority of the votes and formed a government known as the 'Weimar Coalition'.

The National Assembly met from 6 February 1919 at Weimar, a city 240 kilometres to the southwest of Berlin – chosen because it was well away from trouble in those potentially revolutionary times. By the end of July, the Assembly had drawn up and ratified a new constitution. This provided for:

- the election of a *Reichstag* at least every four years, by all men and women over the age of twenty;
- elections to be conducted on the basis of proportional representation, under which the number of seats gained by each party was determined by the proportion of the votes it received;
- the election of a President every seven years;
- the President to choose from the *Reichstag* a Chancellor, who would select other *Reichstag* members to be Ministers in the government he headed; and
- the President, in times of emergency, to be empowered under Article 48 to 'rule by decree', and under Article 25 to dismiss the *Reichstag* and arrange new elections.

Compared with the former political system, this was extremely democratic. Its success, however, would depend on the willingness of elected politicians to work in harmony. As with any such system, there existed the opportunity for individuals or groups to disrupt its operation.

The constitution was very forward-looking and during the Weimar period Germany had one of the most successful social welfare systems in the world:

- The constitution sought to safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens, which were specified in fifty-six articles.
- All citizens were entitled to free welfare – for its time, the most advanced system in the world. There was an increase of 50% in hospital beds, plus the establishment of a network of clinics and social welfare institutions. Between 1927 and 1930, 300,000 homes were provided for the needy.
- The Labour Exchanges and the Unemployment Insurance Law of 16 July 1927 provided for unemployment benefits, funded by a scheme to which workers and employers made equal contributions, to be subsidised by the government in times when funds were insufficient. (It was designed to cope with an unemployment rate of

approximately 800,000 – but registered unemployment would rise to 6 million in 1933, during the Great Depression!)

- Compulsory state arbitration of disputes between employers and unions was also introduced. This tended to favour the workers, often resulting in generous wage increases. An earlier agreement between employers and unions – the Stinnes-Legien agreement of 15 November 1918 – had also benefited workers with the introduction of an eight-hour workday. (By the late 1920s, however, in less potentially revolutionary times, some big businesses were intent upon having such concessions abolished.)

## VERSAILLES PEACE SETTLEMENT

The peace terms, which the Allies presented to Germany's new democratic government on 7 May 1919, were far tougher than had been expected. The Chancellor, Philipp Scheidemann declared that the victors wanted to turn Germans into 'slaves ... doing forced labour behind barbed wire and prison bars'. Declaring that he could not accept the terms being proposed, Scheidemann resigned on 20 June. A new government needed to be formed under the chancellorship of Gustav Bauer, who only agreed to accept the peace treaty because 'we cannot assume the responsibility of a new war'. With just minutes to go before an Allied ultimatum expired, Germany's new, democratically elected National Assembly voted to accept the treaty. On 28 June 1919 representatives of the German government signed the Treaty at Versailles.

By the terms of the Treaty, Germany lost six million inhabitants and 13 % of its European territory:

- The province of Alsace-Lorraine went to France.
- The districts of Moresnet, Eupen and Malmedy went to Belgium.
- The district of Northern Schleswig went to Denmark.
- The district of Posen, together with a 'corridor' of territory almost a hundred kilometres wide, plus parts of East Prussia and Upper Silesia, went to Poland.

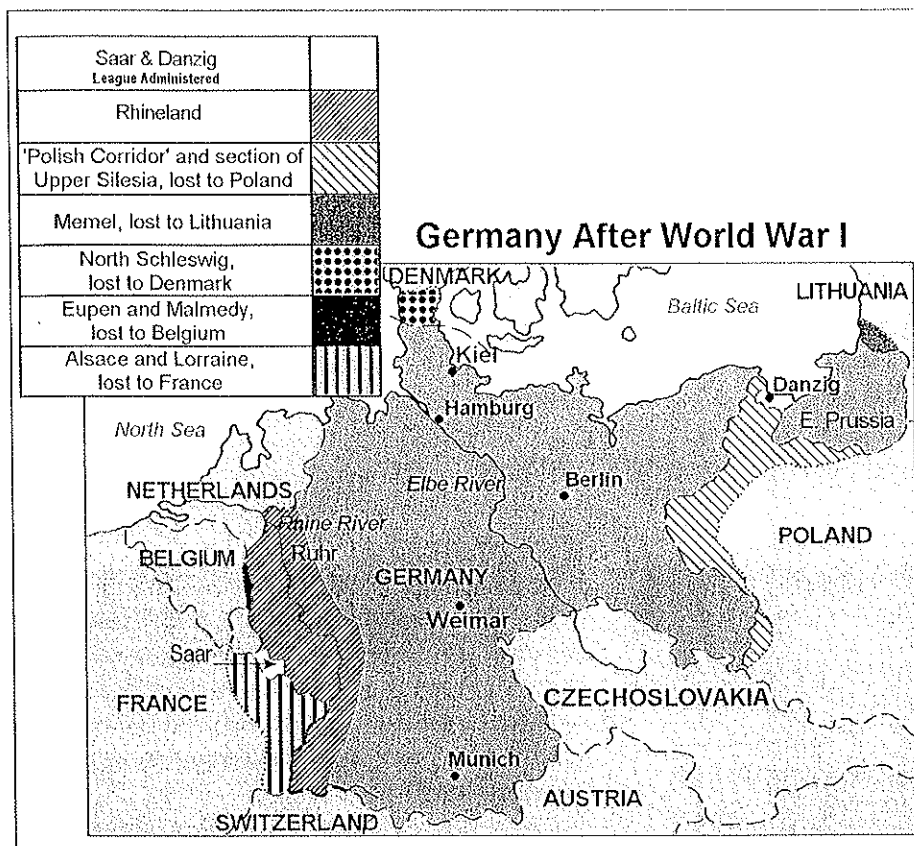
In addition:

- Germany's army was restricted to a maximum of 100,000 long-term soldiers – about one-sixth the size of the army in 1913 – and conscription was abolished; its navy was restricted to 15,000 sailors. Much equipment was destroyed, including 130,000

machine guns and 15,000 aircraft; heavy artillery and modern technology such as tanks were banned.

- Article 231 required that Germany accept 'sole guilt' for the outbreak of the war. This provision was included in the Treaty because it justified the victorious Allies' (not unreasonable) demand that Germany pay reparations, i.e. compensation, for the enormous damage its military forces had caused during the war, particularly during their occupation of Belgium and northern France. Immediately the Allies would seize millions of tonnes of German merchant shipping, 5000 railway engines and 136,000 carriages. (Subsequently, further enormous reparation payments would be calculated and demanded.)
- The Rhineland, Germany's frontier with France, was demilitarised; Germany was prohibited from erecting fortifications or stationing troops in the region. What this meant was that France was presented with the possibility of launching an unopposed attack through the region to the very heart of Germany.
- To ensure compliance, for much of the 1920s an Allied occupation force was stationed in the Rhineland.

All this produced a sense of aggrieved nationalism amongst Germans of every background. It caused a profound sense of injustice and resentment, a determination not to co-operate with the implementation of the Treaty and the desire to undo its provisions as soon as the opportunity presented itself. For very many, this would also translate into hatred of democracy and a desire to return to the type of authoritarian rule which, in the past, appeared to them to have ensured their nation's rise to great power status. At the *Reichstag* elections of 6 June 1920, the combined vote for those political parties the public most closely associated with acceptance of the Treaty, the moderate 'Weimar Coalition', declined from 76 % to 47 %. Political moderation had lost credibility in the eyes of the electorate. The 'Weimar Coalition' never again won a majority of the vote, a real blow for stable democratic government. As for the various politicians who represented Germany at the signing of the armistice in November 1918 and the Treaty in June 1919, they were to be referred to as 'November criminals'. They, along with other politicians who supported the Republic, would become targets for assassination squads associated with the *Freikorps*.



Map 2.1 Germany after the Versailles Peace Treaty

### Major Political Parties of Weimar Germany

	Party	Attitude to Democracy	Supporters
L E F T	German Communist Party, KPD	A party of the extreme left. It aimed for a revolution and the setting up a socialist state modelled on the USSR.	The working class & intellectual supporters. Working class support increased with economic hardship.
	Social Democratic Party, SPD	A moderate socialist party. A mainstay supporter of the new democracy.	Major support came from the working class, but the largest democratic party also had some support across all classes.
C E N T R E	Catholic Centre Party, Zentrum	Represented Catholic interests but also a strong supporter of democracy.	Predominantly supported by German Catholics.
	Bavarian People's Party, BVP	A more conservative Catholic party, but supportive of democracy.	Supported by Bavarian Catholics.
	German Democratic Party, DDP	A social-liberal party which was strongly supportive of the democracy.	Supported by middle class & intellectuals who favoured liberalism and democracy.
R I G H T	German People's Party, DVP	A moderate conservative party, willing to work within the democratic system.	Supported by middle class and conservatives.
	German National People's Party, DNVP	An 'old right' conservative party, hostile to the Weimar democracy and ready to undermine it.	Supported by business leaders, Army officers and the Junker aristocracy, as well as conservatives of all classes.
	National Socialist German Workers' Party, NSDAP — NAZIS	A radical 'new right' wing party committed to the destruction of democracy and the setting up of a 'national-socialist' state.	In times of economic hardship the Nazis drew working class support away from the SPD. At the same time, however, critical support came from the middle class and conservative rural areas.



## 1919-1929: POLITICAL, ECONOMIC & SOCIAL ISSUES

### 1920: The Kapp Putsch

In March 1920 Wolfgang Kapp, supported by *Freikorps* units of former soldiers, attempted a right-wing takeover, or putsch, in Berlin. Even though the takeover failed, it showed that democracy had limited support and there were consequences that further undermined the Weimar Republic:

- *Freikorps* units entered Berlin on 13 March intent on installing Wolfgang Kapp at the head of a new right-wing government. Although the Army did not actively support the *putsch*, it failed to come to the defence of the democratically elected government against the *Freikorps* (General Hans von Seeckt is reported to have said: '*Reichswehr* does not fire on *Reichswehr*'). Unable to rely on the Army, the government had to call upon the workers of Berlin. They mounted a general strike which quickly brought Kapp's ill-planned venture to an end.
- The Berlin strike was followed by a workers' rising in the Ruhr region. On this occasion the Army and *Freikorps*, supported by the government, combined to bring order back to the Ruhr. In a ruthless crackdown, up to 1000 workers and members of the Ruhr's Red Army were killed.
- Clearly, while the Army was tolerant of right-wing violence, it was willing to act quickly against left-wing threats.
- At the same time, by supporting the Army and *Freikorps* against the Ruhr workers, the Social Democrats alienated a large section of their working class supporters. This was a significant issue for the one party that was most committed to democracy.
- Political violence continued, with over 350 assassinations in the first four years of the Weimar Republic. Two prominent victims of right-wing violence were Matthias Erzberger, who had signed the Versailles Treaty, and Walther Rathenau, a brilliant wartime administrator who had been appointed Minister of Reconstruction in 1921.

### 1923: French Occupation of the Ruhr

The German government was forced to agree to pay reparations to the victorious Allies:

- initially 20 billion gold marks by May 1921, gradually increasing to 6 billion gold marks per year;
- 38 million tons of coal annually for ten years; and
- large amounts of timber and chemicals.

On 26 December 1922 the Reparations Commission announced that Germany had failed to deliver the agreed amount of coal and timber. In response, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr industrial region, commencing on 11 January 1923. The German government then directed its officials and the workforce in the Ruhr to follow a policy of 'passive resistance' by stopping work and refusing to co-operate with the occupation force.

Previously, especially from 1916, inflation had been on the rise in Germany due to the Reich government's expenditure, mainly on the war effort, far exceeding its income. Before the war, it took four German marks to purchase one US dollar; by the end of 1919 it took 47 marks. In the post-war period, Weimar governments were faced with massive expenses, such as the costs involved in helping demobilised soldiers return to civilian life. However, they chose not to increase taxation significantly (to cover the increasing deficit in their budgets), out of fear that nationalist opponents would claim their real purpose was to raise funds for reparation payments. Consequently, the German mark continued its rapid slide. By December 1922 it took 7000 marks to purchase just one US dollar. With the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, the government incurred further expenditure when it undertook to make cash payments to the strikers and their families. To cover its expenses, it simply printed more and more money. Eventually there were 1783 printing presses producing bank notes night and day. Finally, in September, the government, headed by Gustav Stresemann decided to end 'passive resistance', returning to a policy of 'fulfilment' – resuming reparation payments in return for French withdrawal from the Ruhr. But by then hyperinflation had taken hold. Goods were costing a billion times what they had 9 years previously!

#### Inflation & Hyperinflation in Germany

##### German Marks Needed to Purchase US\$1

1914	4
1919	47
1922	7,000
1923 (Jan.)	17,000
1923 (Sept.)	25,260,000,000
1923 (Dec.)	4,200,000,000,000

WEIMAR GOVERNMENTS 1919-1933			
CHANCELLOR	PERIOD IN OFFICE	NOTES	PRESIDENT
Philipp Scheidemann (Social Democrats, SPD)	<i>election Jan 1919</i> Feb-June 1919	Scheidemann resigned over the Versailles Treaty.	Friedrich Ebert Feb. 1919 – Feb. 1925
Gustav Bauer (SPD)	June 1919-Mar 1920	Bauer resigned over his failure to get Army support during the Kapp Putsch.	
Hermann Muller (SPD)	March-June 1920 <i>election June 1920</i>	Muller was the last Social Democrat (SPD) Chancellor until 1928.	
Konstantin Fehrenbach (Centre Party, Cen.)	June 1920-May 1921	Fehrenbach, of the Centre Party, resigned after a loss in the Silesian plebiscite.	
Joseph Wirth (Cen.)	May 1921-Nov 1922	Wirth failed to keep SPD support or cope with rising inflation. He was criticised for his fulfilment policy (ie co-operating with the demands of the Versailles Settlement).	
Wilhelm Cuno	Nov 1922-Aug 1923	Cuno was forced out over hyperinflation after the Ruhr invasion, which had been the French government's response to his failure to meet reparations obligations.	
Gustav Stresemann (German People's Party, DVP)	Aug-Nov 1923	Stresemann lost the support of the SPD for severe suppression of the left in comparison to leniency towards right. Incidentally, he set a precedent with the use of an Enabling Act to cope with the emergency.	
Wilhelm Marx (Cen.)	Nov 1923-Jan 1925 <i>election May 1924</i> <i>election Dec 1924</i>	Marx, of the Centre, became Chancellor but Stresemann stayed as Foreign Minister until his death in 1929.	Paul von Hindenburg Feb. 1925 – Mar. 1932 & April 1932 – August 1934
Hans Luther	Jan 1925-May 1926	Luther was forced out in 1926 when he was seen to support the retention of the old imperial flag. A nationalist Chancellor and Hindenburg as President was too much for the democrats.	
Wilhelm Marx (Cen.)	May 1926-June 1928 <i>election May 1928</i>	Marx's Chancellorship lasted two years, an indication of relative political stability!	
Hermann Muller (SPD)	June 1928-Mar 1930	Muller saw the SPD return to government after the 1928 elections but only in a coalition with right wing ministers. He failed to cope with the Depression.	
Heinrich Brüning (Cen.)	Mar 1930-May 1932 <i>election Sept 1930</i>	Brüning used severe measures to cope with the Depression but became unpopular and lost the support of the Reichstag. No government after this was able to rule with majority support. Hindenburg experimented with new Chancellors who each failed to win a majority in an election and were unable to form stable coalitions. He finally turned to Hitler.	
Franz von Papen (Cen.)	May-Nov 1932 <i>election July 1932</i>		
Kurt von Schleicher	Nov 1932-Jan 1933 <i>election Nov 1932</i>		
Adolf Hitler (NAZI)	Jan 1933-Apr 1945 <i>election Mar 1933</i>		



The hyperinflation affected the middle class in a variety of ways:

- the cautious middle class saw the value of their bank savings and government bonds wiped out, and
- retirees saw the value of their pensions wiped out, some being forced to seek charity; but
- those with mortgages on their homes benefited as the debt was wiped out due to the devaluation of the currency.

This had political repercussions:

- Those who had suffered financially tended to blame the moderate democratic parties which had been in coalition government during the period of hyperinflation. At subsequent *Reichstag* elections they voted for more conservative political parties. Ultimately, when the Great Depression struck only a few years after the hyperinflation, large sections of Germany's middle class would put their trust in right-wing political extremism.
- The financial and political turmoil of 1923 provided an opportunity for Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party to attempt a takeover or *putsch*. Even though it was a failure, this *putsch* brought Hitler to national prominence for the first time.

### 1923: Hitler's 'Beer Hall' Putsch

- Adolf Hitler attempted a violent seizure of power in the capital of Bavaria, Munich, on 8/9 November 1923. His ultimate aim had been to lead a march on Berlin to overthrow the Republic – following the example of what the fascist leader, Benito Mussolini, had succeeded in doing in Italy in October 1922. (Section 2, below, deals with the rise of Hitler's Nazi Party.)
- The putsch failed when the Army refused to side with Hitler and he was arrested and charged with treason. Hitler's trial, which took place in Munich from February to April 1924, was presided over by a judge well-known for his nationalist sympathies, Georg Neithardt. He treated Hitler almost as if he was a hero. Many of Germany's judges had held their posts for decades, having been conditioned by conservative values under the old Reich government. Typically, they would deal extremely leniently with right wing, nationalist opponents of the Republic. (It has been calculated that, from late 1919 until mid-1922, 576 politically motivated murders were carried out in Germany. Left-wingers were tried for involvement in 22 of those murders, resulting in 39 being sentenced to death by the courts and the handing down of prison

sentences averaging 15 years. By contrast, right-wingers were implicated in 354 murders, yet none were executed, and they received prison sentences averaging only 4 months.)

- Despite his act of treason resulting in the deaths of 18 persons, including 4 police, Hitler was sentenced to a mere five years imprisonment, then released on parole on 20 December 1924 – thanks to a ruling by the Bavarian Supreme Court. He emerged from prison a hero of the nationalists, his confidence in the essential correctness of his strategy unshaken.
- The experience simply taught Hitler and his Nazi Party that when the opportunity next presented itself, their attempt to overthrow the Republic would need to be planned more thoroughly – for example, carried out in such a way that conservative politicians and the army would co-operate or, at the very least, remain neutral.

### A New Currency – the Rentenmark

- Economic stability was restored following the introduction, in November 1923, of a new currency, the Rentenmark – its value being tied to that of gold, with tight restrictions being placed on the issuing of new banknotes.
- However, with the currency revaluation came deflation, followed by shortages of basic commodities which, in turn, produced a crime wave as the poor resorted to stealing food. Heavily armed gangs of thieves wandered the countryside.
- There were 365,000 convictions for theft in 1923 – a sevenfold increase over 1913. For its more conservative members, this provided evidence that German society was in serious moral decline. Berlin, with its risqué nightclub scene and thriving gay and lesbian sub-cultures, was taken as further evidence of moral decline under democracy. Such an interpretation would be reinforced by the press, especially the new, sensationalist late-afternoon tabloid newspapers, giving prominence to reports of lurid crimes and murder trials.
- All this served to bring further into question the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic and foster a desire amongst many for a more authoritarian system. This prospect received backing from a right-wing literary culture which looked back with nostalgia to the Bismarckian past, predicted the collapse of the Republic and looked forward with enthusiasm to a nationalist-inspired conservative revolution which would establish a Third Reich and oversee Germany's revival.

- Currency stabilisation was also accompanied by government cost cutting – one of the outcomes being the dismissal, between October 1923 and March 1924, of 135,000 of Germany's 826,000 public servants, plus another 262,000 workers employed by government in various jobs. This contributed significantly to an unemployment rate which would remain quite high for the rest of the 1920s.

### 1924-1928: Relative Stability

For a brief period Germany seemed stable:

- The Dawes Plan of 1924 resulted in a reduction of reparation payments, at the same time making loans available from the USA.
- By the Locarno Treaty signed with France in 1925, Germany accepted the borders which had been imposed upon it following its defeat in World War I.
- Membership of the League of Nations in 1926 apparently confirmed acceptance of Germany back into the international community.
- Between May 1926 and June 1928 Chancellor Wilhelm Marx was able to lead a coalition government for more than two years. In 1927 his government was responsible for two significant pieces of legislation: the Provisional Working Hours Law, limiting working hours, and the Unemployment Insurance Act, which provided insurance for the unemployed.

Despite relative political stability, achievements in social policy and an improvement in Germany's international relations, there was much evidence of continuing, underlying problems and the frailty of democracy:

- German politicians were less concerned with promoting the national interest than providing party supporters with benefits. As a result, the nation continued to be much divided along class and religious lines. The need to replace six

### Weimar Culture

Weimar Germany experienced an outpouring of new cultural activity as seen, for example, in the work of novelists such as Thomas Mann and Erich Maria Remarque (*All Quiet on the Western Front*), playwrights like Bertolt Brecht, the Bauhaus school of architecture and design, the popularity of new art forms such as cubism and an internationally acclaimed film industry (films produced included *The Blue Angel*, starring Marlene Dietrich, and *Metropolis*).

This artistic flowering was accompanied by the emergence of avant garde lifestyles, seemingly hedonistic entertainments and a freer approach to sexuality amongst some sections of the community. This phenomenon, epitomised by the cabaret culture of Berlin, has been captured in the wonderful movie *Cabaret*. While Berlin in the 1920s did have a deserved reputation as an international centre of lively, risqué entertainment, however, it would be a mistake to over-emphasise the superficially shocking elements in Weimar culture. They should not overshadow the fact that Berlin was also the international centre for a variety of serious 'modernist' art forms which have had a lasting impact.

#### *Why did this artistic flowering occur?*

- There was some influence from American music and cinema. This was the decade of the 'roaring twenties'.
- Sections of the community which had been repressed in conservative pre-World War I Germany finally had the freedom to express and experiment in a more liberal atmosphere.
- The horrors of World War I, followed by economic and social dislocation, may have contributed to a disillusionment with politics, nationalism, religion and other causes amongst sections of the community who turned, instead, to experimental art forms or simple hedonism. (On the other hand, of course, the same post-war conditions also created violent right-wing groups like the Nazis.)
- Those who participated in many of the new cultural activities turned away from traditional German influences and responded more to trends in the international community. At the same time, many of the new German artists were greatly admired by foreigners. (To use one example, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a pacifist novel which rejected German militarism, was better received in Britain and the US – where it was made into a successful movie – than Germany. Under the Nazis it would be banned.)

#### *What were the results?*

- Germany gained an international reputation for avant garde artforms. This created resentment amongst some German nationalists.
- The 'flowering' was essentially an urban phenomenon and alienated the rural areas and large sections of both the conservative and working classes.
- For both the old conservatives and new populist nationalists such as the Nazis, the 'flowering' was seen as a symptom of the decadence they associated with democracy. The new cultural activity ran counter to a dominant conservatism which emphasised conformity and a single 'German' culture, which prided itself on a heritage that boasted the likes of Beethoven. Modernist art forms were resented as being leftist inspired, degenerate or simply un-German. Moreover, the apparent outbreak of immorality, which seemed to accompany democracy, helped convince many that the country needed a return to a more ordered, authoritarian system of government.

P. Kiem 'The Weimar Republic: 1924-1929',  
*Teaching History*, July 1998.

governments between 1924 and 1928 provided clear proof of a lack of stability. For example, the resignation of Luther's government in May 1926 over the issue of what flag German ships should fly, demonstrated an inability to establish sound priorities.

- In the Presidential election of 1925, the candidate supported by the right wing of politics, retired Field-Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, was successful. His election demonstrated the fact that the majority of Germans remained impressed by past military achievements: they were happy to entrust the safe keeping of their nation to a former soldier, one who had assumed the role of their dictator between 1916 and 1918.
- Unemployment remained quite significant: in 1926 it jumped to 2 million, and remained at more than 6 per cent for the rest of the decade. Industry was undergoing a period of modernisation with the introduction of improved technology, resulting in the need to employ fewer workers. Coal mining is a good example: as a result of the introduction of pneumatic drills and the use of conveyor belts, the need for manual labour in the Ruhr valley declined by 85% in the 15 years to 1929, and almost 200,000 miners were laid off work. Particularly badly affected were the young as they left school or graduated from university. The prospects of them getting full time employment were very poor.
- The German Communist Party had a strong appeal for the unemployed. The vote for this political party – with its determination not to co-operate with the Social Democrats and declared aim of overthrowing the Republic, to be replaced by a dictatorship of the working class – rose at every *Reichstag* election between December 1924 and November 1932, growing from 9% to 16.9%. During the Great Depression, membership of the Communist Party would accelerate rapidly, from 117,000 in 1929 to 360,000 in 1932. For the property-owning middle class, the prospects of a communist revolution seemed both likely and unwelcome.
- On the right of the political spectrum were two political parties, the Nationalists and the People's Party, which campaigned for the votes of the middle classes and were still winning approximately 10% of the vote at *Reichstag* elections in the early 1930s. Both were opposed to Germany having a Republican system. And the Centre Party, which attracted approximately 15% of the vote, from Catholics, increasingly favoured a return to an authoritarian system.

- Considering the hostility from established parties from across the political spectrum, the long-term prospects of the democratic Republic were not especially promising.

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION

After the briefest of periods of apparent stability during its so-called 'Golden period', from 1924 to 1928, the Weimar Republic was hit by a rapid succession of crises:

- In November 1928 iron and steel employers in the Ruhr refused to pay recently awarded wage increases and illegally locked out their workforce of 220,000 for four weeks. Although this dispute ended in a compromise, big business had given clear notice of its intention to destroy the arbitration system. It was an indication that powerful business leaders had never been happy with the way they perceived that democracy had favoured the workers.
- Beginning in about 1927, German farmers were hit badly by a decline in the market price of their produce. This occurred at a time when many German farmers had taken out short-term, high-interest loans to modernise their methods of production. Subsequently, many could not meet mortgage repayments and their properties were auctioned off by the banks.
- On 'Black Thursday', 24 October 1929, panic selling of shares commenced on the New York Stock Exchange. This signalled the onset of the Great Depression, which quickly spread around the world. German industry had been particularly dependent for investment on short-term loans from the United States. The 'crash' of its stock market caused US banks to call in those loans, plunging the German economy into deep depression, with many workers being laid off.
- At the beginning of 1929, unemployment already stood at almost 2.5 million; by the winter of 1930/31, it exceeded 5 million; a year later it peaked at 6 million. When the families of the unemployed are also taken into account, a total of approximately 13 million were directly affected – 20% of the population. Yet the social welfare system had been designed to cater for an unemployment rate of only 800,000. Consequently, on being laid off, a worker could expect to receive relief from the government for only a few months at most.
- Influenced by the unions, the Social Democrats wanted contributions from those still in employment and their employers increased so that unemployment benefits could be maintained. On

the other hand, the People's Party, which represented big business, argued that benefits for the unemployed should be reduced. These two parties were members of Hermann Muller's 'Grand Coalition' government and the unwillingness of either to compromise meant that the government was forced to resign on 27 March 1930.

The collapse of Muller's government was a most significant episode. It marked the beginning of the end for parliamentary democracy. Muller's was to be the last government of the Republic able to call on the backing of a majority in the *Reichstag*. Previously, it had been possible to construct coalition governments from moderate political parties. This was no longer possible. Foolishly, the Social Democrats had moved into opposition, unwilling to participate in government. Increasingly the voters had also been demonstrating a preference for extremist parties of both the right and left, for either the Communist Party (KPD) or Hitler's Nazi Party.

In the *Reichstag* elections of 31 July 1932 the Nazis would win 37.3% of the vote and the KPD 14.3%. When lumped together, their anti-Republic deputies constituted a blocking majority in the *Reichstag*. In practical terms, what this meant was that the *Reichstag* became the scene of much disorder as both Communist and Nazi deputies constantly disrupted proceedings with noisy barracking and points of order. And between July 1932 and February 1933, the *Reichstag* would sit for just 3 days.

## COLLAPSE OF THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

With increasing political polarisation and the great difficulty associated with trying to form a coalition government, the Weimar constitution gave enormous powers to the President. Following a successful military career, the strongly conservative Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) had come out of retirement to be elected President in 1925. Faced with a dilemma as to what to do following Muller's resignation, he depended for advice on a small circle of military officers including his son, Oskar, and General Kurt von Schleicher. Under their influence, the President abandoned the parliamentary convention that a government needed the support of a majority in the *Reichstag*:

- Firstly, on 30 March 1930 Hindenburg appointed as chancellor Heinrich Brüning – an ex-army officer with a desire to restore the monarchy. In March 1931 Brüning severely restricted the right

of the press to criticise government policies – a significant blow to democratic freedom. He then worsened the impact of the Depression on the unemployed by reducing even further their meagre unemployment benefits, while refusing to consider the use of government job-creation schemes. Next, he planned to dismantle whatever remained of the social welfare system, and eventually to reduce the powers of the *Reichstag*, and introduce a more authoritarian system of government. To enforce his policies, the unpopular Brüning was dependent on Hindenburg to use his emergency powers. From Hindenburg's point of view, Brüning then mishandled the presidential elections in 1932. Brüning was only able to arrange support for Hindenburg from the Catholic Centre Party and the Social Democrats, whom Hindenburg despised. It was Hitler who stood as the right's candidate. Although the old man was eventually re-elected, he withdrew his support from Brüning, who resigned on 30 May 1932.

- At the urging of General Schleicher, Hindenburg then appointed as his Chancellor a close friend and landed aristocrat, Franz von Papen. Schleicher was confident Papen could be manipulated. When Papen proved too independent, Schleicher undermined him.
- Next, on 3 December 1932, Hindenburg appointed Schleicher Chancellor. Like his immediate predecessors, however, Schleicher was unable to gain a majority in the *Reichstag*. The political process remained hopelessly deadlocked.
- While it did not have a majority, Hitler's Nazi Party was the largest party in the *Reichstag*. A consequence of significant sections of the population turning to the Nazis during the Depression, this was not because of the desperation of the unemployed masses but largely a result of the fears of the middle class – many turned to the Nazis in the hope that they would prevent a communist takeover.
- In the meantime, the 'old right', epitomised by the aristocrats and army officers around Hindenburg, had its own plans for doing away with democracy and returning to some form of authoritarian government. How this was to be achieved was uncertain, but the general idea was to make use of the popularity of the Nazis, the 'new right', and manipulate Hitler. Under these circumstances, political scheming then took over.
- It was probably Schleicher's intention to have Hitler become a member of his government. Perhaps this could result in the Army, which had

## 2. The Rise Of The Nazi Party

### RISE OF THE NAZI PARTY

Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party was an ultra-nationalist political party, heavily tinged with anti-Semitism (i.e. hatred of Jews), whose supporters came from a variety of social backgrounds:

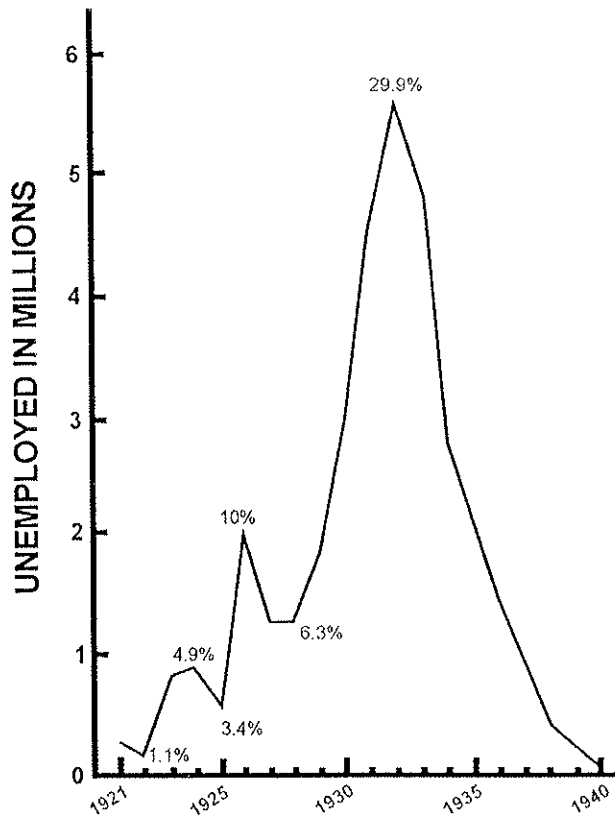
- It had been founded in Bavaria, on 5 January 1919, as the German Workers Party, by a locksmith, Anton Drexler. After attending one of its meetings on 12 September 1919, in his capacity as a spy for the military, Hitler became just the 55<sup>th</sup> member of the small party. He subsequently achieved the status of the party's star attraction, because of his ability as a public speaker who could get crowds to rallies – and pay entrance and membership fees, which were crucial for party finances. On 29 July 1921, an extraordinary general meeting of the party acclaimed Hitler its leader 'with dictatorial powers'.
- While Hitler failed in his attempted seizure of power in 1923, the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, the event made him and the Nazis well known throughout Germany. He emerged from his brief stay in prison a hero of the nationalists. Moreover, the experience taught Hitler that when the opportunity next presented itself, any attempt to overthrow the Republic would need to be carried out in such a way that conservative politicians and the army would co-operate or, at the very least, remain neutral.
- By the time Hitler was released from prison in February 1925, the Weimar Republic had stabilised and this relative political and economic stability would last until 1928/1929. During this time, support for the Nazis, as evidenced by *Reichstag* election results, was very low. Nevertheless, it was also a period when the party reorganised and consolidated so that it would be ready when instability returned. Thus the *Fuhrerprinzip*, giving full control to Hitler, was introduced. More radical elements of the SA were forced to comply with the new strategy of gaining power by going through the democratic process. The Hitler Youth was formed in 1926 and the Nuremberg Rallies and other aspects of a highly successful propaganda apparatus were developed. Even though support for the original Nazi Party programme was restated, it would always be the nationalist rather than any socialist elements in this programme that Hitler and those closest to him took seriously.

been limited to 100,000 by the Treaty of Versailles, being boosted by the addition of the 400,000 members of the Nazi Party's private army, the SA. For the conservative Army command such a development had its attractions. But Schleicher badly miscalculated.

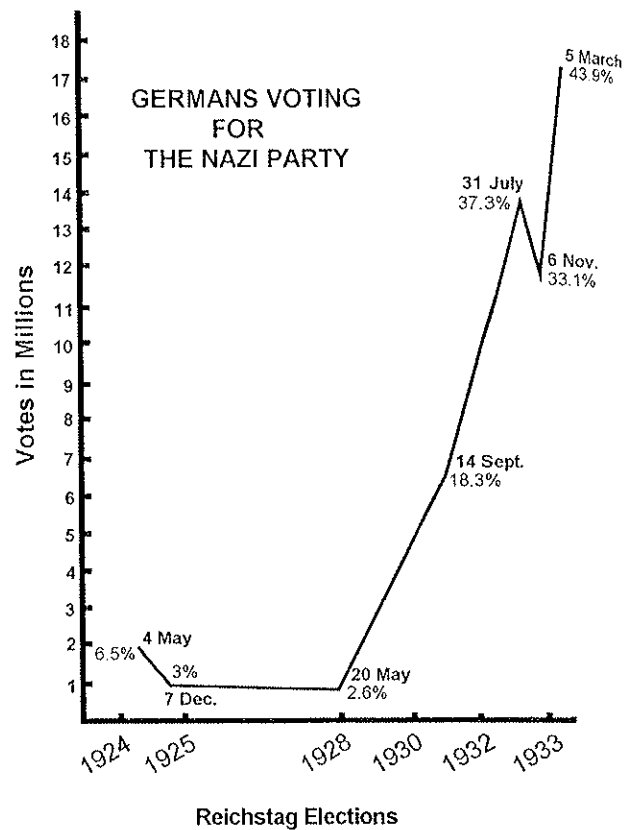
- Hitler would only have the Nazi Party support a government of which he himself was Chancellor. And despite his previous record for violence, everyone was underestimating the danger Hitler represented.
- Finally, Hitler was supported in his ambition by Papen. Out for revenge, Papen set about having Schleicher removed and replaced by Hitler. He did this in the (very mistaken) belief that as Vice Chancellor he would be able to control Hitler. Up to this point, President Hindenburg had been totally opposed to Hitler. He now accepted the advice of people such as his son and Papen to appoint the Nazi leader Chancellor on 30 January 1933.

From the point of view of conservative politicians, army officers and big business, this development was vastly preferable to a return to parliamentary democracy which previously allowed a say in the decision making process to the despised Social Democrats. But, with hindsight, Hitler's appointment was a gross blunder. It was a radical step the President did not have to take, the outcome of desperate circumstances and the short sightedness of those who advised him.

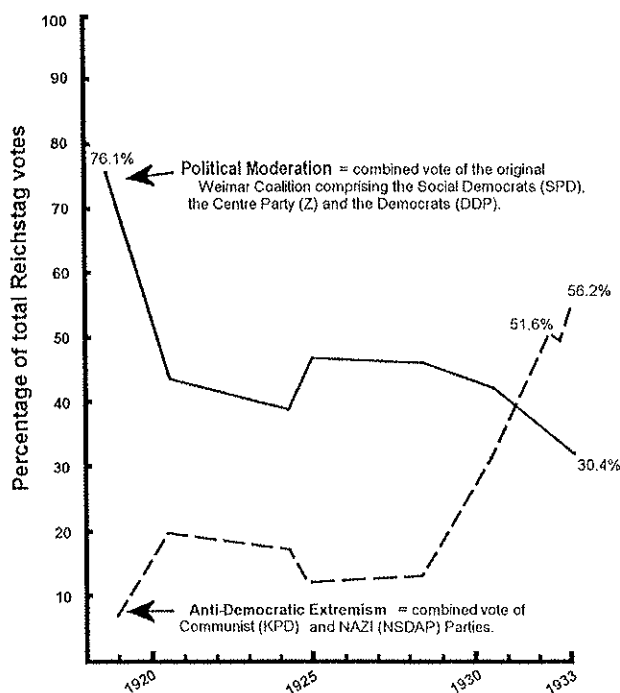
Regardless of President Hindenburg's appointment of Hitler as Chancellor, the reality was that Germany's experiment in democracy had failed. (And this was by no means an outcome unique to Germany. In many other European countries by this time, democracy had given way to dictatorships of various kinds. Indeed, for democracy to survive was the exception.) By the 1930s, the key players in Germany no longer wanted parliamentary democracy to work: the political parties were unprepared to cooperate; too many powerful outside forces were determined to abandon it. A quite likely scenario was the emergence of some type of authoritarian regime, backed by the military. General Schleicher could probably have achieved such an outcome with the cooperation of President Hindenburg. However, despite being a schemer, Schleicher failed to exploit the possibility. Hitler, on the other hand, did not fail. He had been waiting in the wings impatiently, eager for such an opportunity to present itself!



Graph 2.1 German unemployment, 1920-1940

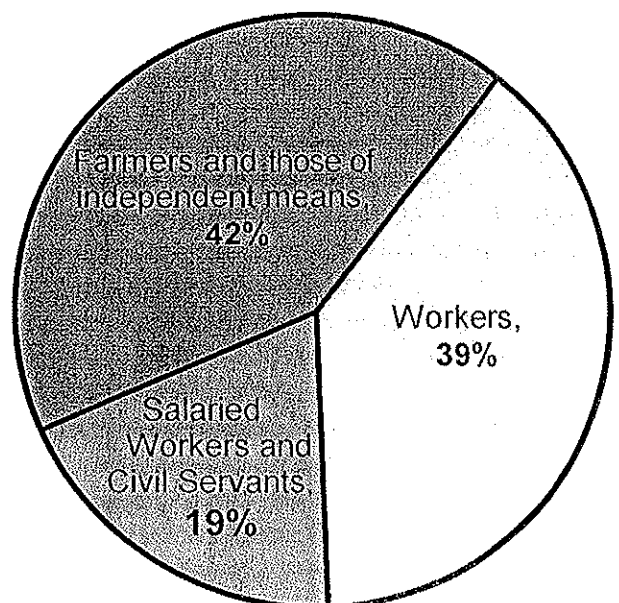


Graph 2.3 Votes for the Nazi Party



Graph 2.2 Political moderation and extremism in the Reichstag

### WHO VOTED FOR THE NAZIS?



Graph 2.4 Who voted for the Nazis?



### Nazi Party Programme - Key Demands

- The union of all Germans to form a Greater Germany.
- The overturning of the Versailles Treaty.
- Land for the settlement of surplus population.
- Only those of German blood could be a member of the nation. No Jew could be a member of the nation.
- None but citizens of the nation could vote or have official appointments.
- Incomes unearned by work were to be abolished.
- Large industries needed to share profits.
- Generous old-age pensions.
- Prohibition of speculation in land.
- Ruthless action against criminals such as money lenders and profiteers.
- Only German citizens could have any influence over German newspapers.
- There needed to be a strong central Reich government.

- Following unexpected success in winning votes in the rural areas of Protestant northern Germany in the *Reichstag* elections of May 1928, the Nazis would target that region with specific promises to suit local circumstances. By the 1930s, the Nazi Party was proving most attractive to Protestant members of the middle class, such as small farmers, and they provided the bulk of its votes.
- In September 1928 the German government was presented with the Young Plan. Even though it offered a rescheduling and reduction of Germany's reparation payments, nationalists were opposed to any agreement with the Versailles Treaty that Germany should pay reparations as a result of its 'war guilt'. Alfred Hugenburg, a wealthy industrialist and leader of the Nationalist Party, formed a united front with Hitler, the Harzburg Front, in opposition to acceptance of the Young Plan. Even though the Harzburg Front failed to prevent the government from accepting the Young Plan and soon fell apart, the Nazi Party benefited financially from the connection with big business and Hitler's reputation was enhanced by the association with respectable conservative leaders. The stage was now set for the Great Depression and the Nazis' dramatic increase in electoral support.
- Originally the Nazis had campaigned to attract the support, specifically, of workers. And the working class – forming approximately 54% of the total German population – would provide a consistent 39/40% of the Nazi vote at *Reichstag* elections between 1928 and 1933. The 'workers' who voted for the Nazis were most likely to be non-unionised rural labourers from areas where Protestants lived – rather than from big cities and heavily industrialised regions.

- A clear indication of the Nazis' popularity was the fact that 13.7 million Germans voted for them in July 1932, 37.3 % of the total. (This constituted the largest number of votes ever won by any political party in the Weimar Republic, exceeding by over 2 million the previous highest total won by the SPD in 1919.)

The general reason for much of the Nazis' undoubted popular appeal can be traced back to their racially-based, ultra-nationalist ideology. Their electioneering speeches were filled with references to Germans sharing a common racial/cultural heritage, combined with a commitment that, on coming to power, the Nazis would set about building a 'national ethnic community', or *Volksgemeinschaft*, in which all 'racially pure' Aryans would be accommodated equally, regardless of social background. This concept had a powerful appeal because it promised to do away with the class-based strife so characteristic of Weimar politics:

- for the middle class it must have sounded like the end of the nightmare threat of communist revolution that had terrorised them for so long;
- for workers it seemed like a commitment to the type of social equality and justice they had been longing for.

It was when the Great Depression reached its worst that the Nazi message proved most attractive. With unemployment ravaging society, various Nazi groups were to be encountered going door-to-door collecting food and clothing for the poor, running soup kitchens, holding Christmas parties for the less fortunate, etc. It was a coordinated effort designed to project a caring image. Unlike other politicians who merely talked, they claimed to be a vigorous young movement with a social conscience that actually achieved results. The proof of the effectiveness of this campaign is to be found in the numbers who voted for the Nazis.

Evidence of how the Nazis gained strength from the Great Depression is provided by the rise of the SA. Its membership rocketed from 30,000 in August 1929 to 445,279 in August 1932. The majority probably consisted of skilled young men thrown out of work. The Nazis attracted them by providing hostel accommodation and food, in addition to military-style training.

Even though Hitler was committed to coming to power legally, violence continued to be used against opponents. SA functions involved protecting Party meetings against attacks by political opponents and the distribution of propaganda leaflets at election times. It was then that they engaged in violent street brawls with

5 March  
43.9%

Nov.  
3.1%

the members of rival party armies, especially the communist Red Front-Fighters' League. Many deaths resulted from such violence. For example, when on 17 July 1932 a march by thousands of SA through the working class district of Altona was met by thousands of Red Front-Fighters, 18 were killed and more than a hundred injured. But rather than lose them votes, the Nazis' involvement in such violence added to their appeal for the middle class – because they were attacking the dreaded Communists.

### Hitler's Appeal

'... someone was standing up and began to talk, hesitatingly and shyly at first ... Then suddenly the speech gathered momentum. I was caught, I was listening ... The crowd began to stir. The haggard grey faces were reflecting hope ... Two seats to my left an old officer was crying like a child... It was as though guns were thundering ... I was beside myself. I was shouting hurrah. Nobody seemed surprised. The man up there looked at me for a moment. His blue eyes met my glance like a flame. This was a command. At that moment I was reborn ... Now I know which road to take.'

**Joseph Goebbels describing the impact of a Hitler speech in 1922**

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'Here it seemed to me was hope. Here new ideals ... The perils of Communism, which seemed inexorably on the way, could be checked, Hitler persuaded us, and instead of hopeless unemployment, Germany could move toward economic recovery ...

It must have been during these months that my mother saw an SA parade in the streets of Heidelberg. The sight of discipline in a time of universal chaos, the impression of energy in an atmosphere of universal hopelessness, seems to have won her over also.'

**Albert Speer describing how both he and his mother came to join the Nazi Party in 1931**

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'The understanding of the masses is very limited, and their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous ... all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few facts and must harp on these in slogans ...

The mass meeting is also necessary because in it the individual, who at first while becoming a supporter of a young movement feels lonely ... for the first time gets the picture of a larger community which in most people has a strengthening, encouraging effect ...'

**Adolf Hitler writing in *Mein Kampf***

### Deaths Reported from Political Violence Between Nazis and Communists

	Communists	Nazis
1920s	92	29
1930	44	17
1931	52	42
1932	75	84

### Hitler's Accession to Power

Hitler's appointment as Chancellor was greeted by a mass torchlight parade, stage-managed by the Nazis, through Berlin streets on the evening of 30 January 1933. There were more demonstrations of support across the nation over following nights. The mood reminded some of the enthusiasm of the crowds back in August 1914 at the outbreak of World War I. The marchers were filled with a heightened sense of nationalism and the expectation that, under the Nazis, Germany would be 'reawakened' and 'renewed'.

The Nazis' political opponents generally did nothing. Because of bitter differences dating back to 1918-19, the Communists would not co-operate with the Social Democrats to organise a general strike. Rather than encounter opposition, the Nazis were more likely to be met with co-operation. The police were very keen to co-operate. On 3 March, on the eve of a *Reichstag* election, 300 university academics issued an appeal for Germans to vote for the Nazis. University students invited Propaganda Minister Goebbels to join them on 10 May in a demonstration 'against the un-German spirit' by burning 'un-German' books – such as Remarque's anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

On 1 June a conference of Catholic bishops issued a statement in which they welcomed the 'national awakening' that was occurring with the new regime, although they expressed some concern at its racial views. On 12 November another group of Catholic bishops issued a statement approving actions taken to save Germany from 'the horror of Bolshevism'.

Hitler set about winning over the senior command of the army in a closed 2½-hour address on 3 February 1933 – with statements such as 'The suppression of Marxism with all means is my goal' and 'Democracy and pacifism are impossible'. He gave the assurance that 'We stand at the side of the army and work for the army'; and his future plans were based upon 'enlarging the army'. Finally, he called upon the generals for a commitment 'to understand me and support me' in 'an active foreign policy'.

## 1933-1934: CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

### An Initial Wave of Terror & Exclusion

The Nazis went about concentrating as much power as possible in their own hands while also ensuring against the possibility of any serious opposition. Very visible was their use of terror in the form of physical violence. People could see for themselves the smashed teeth and broken limbs of those beaten up on the streets. Leading Nazi Hermann Göring had been made Prussian Minister of the Interior, which gave him control of the police across half of Germany. On 22 February 1933 he established an 'auxiliary police' drawn from the SA, SS and the nationalist ex-servicemen's league, the Steel Helmet. Over the next few months the SA murdered perhaps 600. Another 100,000 were placed under 'protective custody' and thrown into 'concentration camps for political prisoners', the first opening on 22 March at Dachau outside Munich. And all this was 'legalised' – for example by the issuing, on 21 March, of an amnesty for any acts committed in the 'national uprising'.

The victims of this wave of violence were mainly from the left wing of politics, such as trade union officials and members of the Communist Party. The Nazis also classified Germany's 525,000 Jews as enemies and they too became targets for a bashing. With Hitler's approval, 1 April 1933 was declared Boycott Day. Placard carrying detachments of the SA and Hitler Youth painted slogans on Jewish businesses and stopped customers from entering. On 7 April the Nazi government issued its Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil Service. Amongst other things, it provided for the dismissal from government employment of 'non-Aryans' – defined as anyone who happened to have a Jewish grandparent. On 30 June, the dismissal provision was extended to government employees who were married to Jews.

### February 1933:

#### Law for the Protection of People & State

On 27 February 1933 a young Dutch anarchist, Marinus van der Lubbe, lit a fire which resulted in the *Reichstag* building burning down. As he surveyed the scene, Göring declared: 'This is the beginning of the Communist uprising! Now they'll strike out! There's not a minute to waste!'. The Communists were blamed and an emergency decree 'For the Protection of People and State' – known also as the Reichstag Fire Decree – was proclaimed on 28 February. It gave the government the power to place 'restrictions on personal liberty, on

the right of free expression of opinion, including freedom of the press, on the right of assembly and association', to open letters in the mail and to listen in on telephone calls. On the eve of an election, to which Hindenburg had previously agreed, this gave the Nazis enormous power to deal with political opponents. Subsequently, the conservative courts treated those associated with the Communist Party as though they were traitors. On election day, 5 March, police warned of the possibility of terrorist attacks and armed detachments, including SA and SS, patrolled the streets. Despite all this, the Communists still won 12.3% of the vote – and the Nazis won only 43.9%, well short of what had been expected.

### March 1933: The Enabling Act

When the newly elected *Reichstag* met on 23 March, its 81 Communist deputies had either already been arrested or gone into hiding. Of the 538 deputies present, 444 voted in favour of the Enabling Act (or Act for the Removal of Distress from People and Reich). This Act replaced parliamentary democracy with the rule of Hitler and the Nazi Party. Only 94 deputies, all Social Democrats, voted against the Enabling Act, but with the other parties voting with the Nazis, they had the two-thirds majority needed to change the constitution. The Act did away with the need for new laws to be voted upon by the *Reichstag*. Rather, it provided for 'national laws ... [to] be prepared by the Chancellor [i.e. Hitler] and published in the official gazette', and for them then to become law on the day after being published. In effect, Hitler became the law. In future, the only practical purpose to be served by the *Reichstag* was as a place where Hitler sometimes delivered major speeches.

Once in government, Nazi strategy was always to give the *appearance* of acting 'legally'. They *seemed* to follow the letter of the law – for example, by observing the rules of parliamentary procedure to have legislation enacted. But the effect of their laws was to destroy the civil liberties of others; they enabled officials and Nazi supporters to act in criminal ways without fear of arrest or punishment. In the meantime, with few exceptions, the Nazis' political opponents severely limited their own options by dutifully obeying the law. Thus the Nazis cynically exploited the opportunities provided by democracy to destroy it.

### Outlawing Political Opposition

Between 22 June and 5 July 1933 all other political parties were disbanded. Prior to this, the trade union movement had been abolished. With little qualification, what was going on met with the approval of the

overwhelming majority of Germans! Hitler was seen as providing the strong leadership that the nation had been lacking for a long time. On 14 October the German people were given the opportunity to express themselves in a plebiscite which asked: 'Do you, German man, and you, German woman, approve this policy of your Reich government, and are you ready to declare it to be the expression of your own view and your own will, and solemnly to give it your allegiance?' – to which 95.1% voted 'Yes'.

### 'Co-ordination' of German Society

Between February and July 1933, the Nazis set about 'co-ordination' or *Gleichschaltung*. This concept derives from another German term used in industry, *Gleichschrifter*: it referred to a device that allows electricity to flow in only one direction, changing alternating into direct current. What was intended was that German society and its institutions should conform to Nazi principles. The process of 'co-ordination' would involve the closing down of many independent organisations, to be replaced by Nazi-controlled bodies – and it was greeted with widespread cooperation. There was also a rush to join the Nazi Party. By January 1933, 1.4 million had already joined; another 5.8 million had joined by May 1945. Not too many would have been extreme racists; more were probably motivated by their desire to improve job prospects regardless of the moral costs.

Another thing that would be 'co-ordinated' was radio. Propaganda Minister Goebbels described it as 'the most modern and the most important instrument of mass influence that exists anywhere'. In the months preceding the March 1933 *Reichstag* elections, Goebbels intervened to stop all but the Nazis and their political allies having their party-political programmes broadcast.

### 30 June 1934: Night of the Long Knives

The possibility existed of conservatives carrying out a coup, to replace the Nazis with a dictatorship backed by the Army. After all, conservatives had believed that they would control Hitler and they had no desire to see him implement the socialist aspects of the Nazi platform, which radical sections of the party were calling for. Hitler, however, had no intention of implementing policies that would alienate the Army, the one institution in Germany that could still remove him from power.

Army leaders were particularly disturbed by plans of the leader of the SA, Ernst Röhm, for his organisation – which had grown to 3.5 million – to replace the army

as Germany's main defence force. In a submission to the Minister for War on 1 February 1934, Röhm proposed the army be reduced to a training organisation. Subsequently, the Minister warned Hitler of the possibility that the President might declare martial law and replace the government.

This forced Hitler's hand. With his approval, the leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, organised an attack on the SA leadership. The Army was also involved, supplying weapons and transport. The SS struck on the 'Night of the Long Knives', 30 June 1934. Approximately 200 were murdered, only 50 of whom belonged to the SA.

There were significant outcomes:

- The Army was satisfied that Hitler had dealt with the threat from the SA and the radical wing of his own party, which had wanted to implement the socialist aspects of the Nazi program. The brutality of the operation appears to have impressed the generals with Hitler's decisiveness in the face of a supposed threat from the left. Out of gratitude, the army leadership arranged for its troops to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler, personally, on 2 August 1934, following the death of President Hindenburg. And the generals had no objections to Hitler then combining the positions of Chancellor and President. In return they got what they wanted: 'firm' political leadership and the opportunity to expand.
- More importantly, Hitler achieved what he wanted: the backing of the army. And the process had begun that would see the army coming more and more under his personal control.
- Furthermore, Hitler's direct involvement in mass murder did not undermine his popularity – rather it enhanced it. Germans went along with the propaganda-spin that the murders demonstrated their *Führer's* absolute determination to uphold law and order, even if this required the elimination of members of his own Party, those who had become disruptive and acted immorally.
- Hitler abandoned any real commitment to the socialist aspects of the Nazi programme.

### 3. Nazism In Power

## HITLER'S ROLE IN THE NAZI STATE

### The *Führer Prinzip*

It had taken a little while for Hitler to assert his control of the party founded by Anton Drexler. The formalisation of his leadership in July 1921 also saw the introduction of the *Führer Prinzip*, 'Leadership Principle':

- As *Führer*, it was Hitler who determined the meaning of Party ideology. This he outlined broadly in *Mein Kampf*, originally published in two parts in 1925 and 1926. In 1928 he wrote a more detailed treatment called his *Second Book* but this was not published. When a crucial issue needed to be settled, it was the *Führer* who made the final decision. It did not mean, however, that he constantly issued detailed orders.
- Hitler preferred a Social Darwinist approach to administration: he deliberately allowed much overlapping of responsibilities between subordinates and was unconcerned about the conflict that did frequently occur. He believed such an approach enabled the strongest individuals to assert themselves and the best ideas to emerge.

### The *Führer Myth*

Hitler was to command tremendous loyalty from the general German population – much, much more than that normally accorded a head of state. This was due largely to the '*Führer myth*' crafted by Joseph Goebbels, his future Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Goebbels considered it his greatest achievement. It was essentially a manufactured image, displaying qualities that would go down well with the German public. From listening to Goebbels comment over the radio and reading the Nazi press, one was left with the strong impression Hitler was exactly the type of leader Germany needed.

In the *Reichstag* election campaigns of the early 1930s, Hitler was presented as the 'Leader of the coming Germany', youthful and dynamic, who could bring an end to the turmoil many associated with the Weimar Republic. After he had been made Chancellor, the public was led to believe Hitler was some type of saint. To mark Hitler's birthday each year, for example, Goebbels would make a radio broadcast. He spoke of Hitler as one who had turned his back on the joys of family life to totally devote himself to public service. On one occasion, Goebbels explained how he loved

### Leading Nazis

**Hermann Goering**, a decorated war hero from World War I, joined the Nazi Party in 1922 and was badly wounded during the Munich Putsch. In 1928 he was elected a Nazi member of the Reichstag and became its President in 1932. As Prussian Minister of Interior in Hitler's first cabinet, in charge of security forces, he played a crucial role in the Nazi consolidation of power. As commander of the Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) and, from 1936, coordinator of the Four Year Plan for the economy, Goering had enormous potential power. However, even though officially Hitler's deputy, Goering lost control of the security forces to Himmler, was discredited by the *Luftwaffe's* failures and saw Albert Speer take charge of the economy. Despite claiming no great ideological commitment to the Nazi cause, Goering was involved in implementing Nazi anti-Semitic policies.

**Joseph Goebbels** joined the Nazi Party in 1925 and, after a brief period during which he supported the socialist wing of the party, became Hitler's most devoted follower. In 1926 he was made *Gauleiter* (local party leader) of Berlin. When he became Chancellor Hitler appointed Goebbels Minister for Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, a position that gave him enormous control over German media and the arts. Goebbels was a brilliant propagandist, responsible for creating and sustaining the *Führer Myth*. He also used his position and talents to spread anti-Semitism and in 1938 he orchestrated the *Kristallnacht* violence against Germany's Jews.

**Heinrich Himmler** joined the Nazi Party in 1922. In 1929 he was placed in charge of the SS, a small unit formed as a personal body guard for Hitler. Himmler would use this position to amass power. He expanded the SS and, in the 1934 Night of the Long Knives, it was used to eliminate the SA leadership. Himmler now had control of both organisations and in 1936 Hitler placed him in charge of all security organisations, including the secret police, the *Gestapo*. Thus, Himmler became supreme director of Nazi terror. With the outbreak of World War II his authority quickly expanded into occupied territories and Himmler's organisations were principally responsible for implementing Nazi racial policies in concentration camps and death camps. At the same time, the SS continued to expand with the creation of combat divisions that fought alongside the German army. Himmler's position gave him more potential power than any other person in Nazi Germany.

**Martin Bormann** was a colourless party figure who worked behind the scenes. His position as Hitler's private secretary meant that he was always close to Hitler and, particularly in the later war years, he controlled access to the *Führer*. In the constant power plays that went on around the *Führer*, Bormann was a rival to Himmler, Goering and Goebbels, with his power base being the party organisation.

Whatever the nature of the rival empires, competing ambitions and chaotic administration around Hitler, it should be noted that Bormann and Goebbels remained loyal to Hitler until his death. And, even though Goering and Himmler made separate moves to assume control, this was not until the final days of the Third Reich's disintegration, when they were concerned about their own prospects after Germany's defeat.

young children and how they felt so at ease in his presence that they wanted to confide in him. This was all a total fabrication, but once the Nazis were in government and could manipulate the media, it was the only type of information publicly available about Germany's head of government.

When foreign policy successes were achieved without military conflict and bloodshed (such as in March 1936, when German troops reoccupied the demilitarised Rhineland, and in March 1938, with the union of Germany and Austria), these were presented by Goebbels as evidence of Hitler's ability as an international statesman – and his popularity soared.

The main significance of the '*Führer* myth' was that it gave, initially, Nazi Party members and, later, all Germans, a person to whom to direct their loyalty. Hitler served as a source of unification for a movement and a nation that was otherwise extremely divided. He was respected as a leader who intuitively understood, and tirelessly worked at achieving what, supposedly, was in Germany's best interests.

### **'Working Towards the *Führer*'**

According to his Press Chief, Otto Dietrich: 'in the twelve years of his rule in Germany Hitler produced the biggest confusion in government that ever existed in a civilised state'. One of his assistants, Fritz Wiedemann, explained: 'He disliked reading files. I got decisions out of him without him ever asking for the relevant papers. He took the view that many things sorted themselves out if they were left alone'. Unlike other 20th century dictators, Hitler did not continuously issue detailed directives – he was too lazy for that. Typically he would leave subordinates with the responsibility to make decisions, on the basis of what they understood were his broad goals. Such an understanding could be acquired from his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, from his speeches and from broad ranging conversations they may possibly have had with him. What especially pleased Hitler was when a subordinate came up with a radical way of implementing some vague notion he may have expressed. One historian has described the phenomenon of 'working towards the *Führer*', a process whereby followers would anticipate what the *Führer* wanted, on the basis of Nazi policy or Hitler's speeches, and put it into practice. (See the discussion in Kershaw's *Hitler: 1889-1936 Hubris*, chapter 13.) When it came to racial policy, especially treatment of the Jews, this resulted in increasingly more violent initiatives.

## **NAZISM AS TOTALITARIANISM**

'Totalitarianism', at its most basic, is a term used to describe an authoritarian system of government in which there is only one political party, with its leader exercising dictatorial control over all other institutions, demanding complete subservience of the citizens and imposing a single ideology. During the 1960s, historians were in no doubt that this was an accurate term to describe Nazi Germany. Some historians still feel it is appropriate. More recently, many consider there are better ways of describing what Germany was really like under the Nazis. For example, the chaos that reigned because Hitler did not seek to exercise a tight, centralised control seems inconsistent with the notion of totalitarianism. Many historians now see Nazi Germany essentially as a state in which there was a constant struggle for power between Hitler's immediate subordinates, such as Himmler, Goebbels and Göring, as they sought to increase the size of their own individual institutional empires – the term 'polycracy' has been coined to describe such a situation. A very strong case can also be made that Nazi Germany was, first and foremost, a 'racial state', and that totalitarianism fails to accommodate this defining characteristic. As to whether Nazi Germany was totalitarian, or to what extent, there is no correct answer – there can be persuasive arguments on both sides.

## **PROPAGANDA, TERROR & REPRESSION**

### **'Selling' the Regime: Nazi Propaganda**

Many who survived World War II were to look back on life under the Nazis, nostalgically, as 'the good old days' when law and order prevailed – replacing a crime wave that had engulfed the Weimar Republic, especially during its later years. In an interview published in the main Nazi newspaper the *Völkischer Beobachter* on 26 November 1933, Prussia's Nazi chief of police Kurt Daluge explained that his purpose was to achieve a society 'in which every racial comrade could also walk through lonely streets in the evening with complete security. He ought to be able to leave the window open without having to worry about a break-in and above all ought to be able to sleep peacefully again with the feeling that we are watching out for him'. It was similarly reported that the days were over when 'unaccompanied women had to worry about getting home safely at night'. Under the Nazis, the press was filled with a never-ending series of crime and punishment stories which followed guidelines



## WAS NAZI GERMANY A TOTALITARIAN STATE?

### YES

- During the consolidation period, 1933-1934, Hitler and the Nazi Party destroyed Germany's democratic constitution and eliminated almost all rival centres of power, including other political parties and trade unions. The Enabling Act provided the basis for Hitler to abandon government through cabinet meetings.
- On 30 June 1934, the Night of the Long Knives, internal party opposition was eliminated.
- When President Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934 Hitler abolished the office of President and combined all leadership roles into the position of *Führer*, effectively dictator of Germany. At the same time, the Army swore an oath of personal allegiance to Hitler – this went a long way towards neutralising the only institution in Germany that could present a threat to Nazi power. In any case, the Nazi SS would eventually rival the power of the German Army.
- With such actions as control over education, compulsory membership of the Hitler Youth and intimidation of Christian churches, the Nazis were able to impose their own ideology, particularly on the young, and Nazify German society.
- Goebbels directed a highly effective propaganda campaign that established the *Führer* myth, helping to ensure widespread loyalty to Hitler.
- The Nazi security apparatus used terror to ensure complete conformity and was able to quickly eliminate any serious opposition to Nazi rule.
- While big business largely retained its influence over the German economy, it only did so while it served Nazi purposes: restoration of full employment, rearmament and support for the war effort.
- While Hitler had lazy work habits and was unconcerned with detail, this did not make him a 'weak dictator'. The chaotic and competing party organisation that went on around him did not undermine his own power. All of the other powerful figures such as Goring and Himmler remained loyal until the situation became hopeless at the end of the war.
- The intentionalist view, that everything was ultimately directed by Hitler, is correct. In the things that mattered to him, such as foreign policy and racial policy, his will prevailed. Indeed, in any area, it is difficult to find examples of anyone going against Hitler's will. This is consistent with the *Führerprinzip* – Hitler's ideology was imposed on the Nazi Party, which imposed it on Germany; Hitler's will was the basis for all law.

### NO

- Even after their consolidation of power, the Nazis continued to rely upon elements of the old German establishment such as civil servants, business leaders and the officer corps to govern Germany and carry out their policies.
- Big business retained its control over the German economy and flourished under the Nazis.
- Hitler was a 'weak dictator'. He allowed other leading Nazis, such as Himmler and Goring, to accumulate enormous personal power on the basis of their own large empires. With the regional Nazi leaders, the *Gauleiters*, they competed for power and influence. As a result, Nazi rule was chaotic rather than efficient. Rather than being autocratic, with one powerful ruler, it was polycratic, with many competing centres of power. During the war years Albert Speer would struggle to impose efficiency on this system.
- It can be argued that the Nazis were not successful in transforming Germany into a Nazi society. For example, there was resistance to joining the Hitler Youth and the churches retained a good deal of their influence.
- There was also resistance to Nazi rule, from individual church figures, from socialists and from army officers and conservative circles. There was never total conformity.
- German resistance to Nazi rule should not be exaggerated. A much more significant argument against the view that the Nazis exercised totalitarian control is that their rule was actually based on a great deal of popular support:
  - In free elections prior to 1933 the Nazi vote was 37%.
  - In an August 1934 plebiscite, 90% of voters approved of Hitler becoming *Führer*.
  - Throughout the 1930s Hitler's popularity was consolidated as unemployment went down and Hitler enjoyed foreign policy successes without resort to war.
- Relatively few non-Jewish Germans were subject to terror – in 1939 there were only 21,000 arrests by the Gestapo.
- The Nazis were sensitive to the need for popular support, as evidenced by the 'Strength Through Joy', 'Beauty of Labour' and 'Winter Help' movements. More significantly, for someone largely ignorant of economics, Hitler saw the need to avoid high inflation that might see a return to the unrest of the early 1920s. When war broke out, 'total war' was put off to avoid hardship on the home front.
- The structuralist interpretation argues that Nazi Germany did not operate under the single direction of Hitler. Rather, events were the outcome of a complex interplay of many factors within German society.
- The totalitarian view is an oversimplification. In placing the focus on Hitler and the party leadership, there is the danger that other factors, such as the widespread support for his policies and the involvement of many individuals in their implementation, will be ignored.

issued by Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry. Newspaper readers were given the strong impression that a war on crime was being fought and won, decisively – that the Nazis had cleared the streets of criminals. Nazi justice officials made extensive use of the death penalty for serious crimes: more than 80% of those sentenced to death were actually executed – compared with less than 10% under the Republic.

Nazi propaganda did a superb job of 'selling' the successes of the regime. It made much of government work-creation programs, especially the construction of *Autobahns*. The newsreels seen by moviegoers frequently featured reports of Hitler using a spade to turn the first sods of earth for a new road construction scheme, or officiating at the opening of a completed section. In 1934 more than 100,000 were employed building 'Roads of the *Führer*'. At one stage that same year, almost a million were to be engaged in various work-creation programs. During the Nazis' first year in power, unemployment dropped by more than two million, and by August 1935 had declined to 1.7 million. By 1938 there had been a return to full employment. The Nazis claimed the credit for the return of stability. And confidence in the future did return, reflected in a significantly increased number of marriages.

In his 2001 publication *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, Professor Robert Gellately argues that 'within a matter of months after his appointment as Chancellor, most citizens came to accept and then firmly to back' Hitler. 'On balance, most people seemed prepared to live with the idea of a surveillance society, to put aside the opportunity to develop the freedoms we usually identify with liberal democracies, in return for crime-free streets, a return to prosperity, and what they regarded as a good government'.

Rarely did opposition to the Nazi regime surface, and when it did it was very limited.

### The SA – *Sturmabteilung*

The SA was set up as a Nazi Party private army. In 1921 it was named the *Sturmabteilung*, 'Storm Detachment'. Its members were also known as stormtroopers and, later, brownshirts. While the SA was important in the Nazi rise to power, once Hitler became Chancellor it lost its role and was soon supplanted by the SS.

- Early SA members were recruited from World War I veterans and others who were disaffected by

conditions in Germany in the early 1920s. The SA's role was to act as a Nazi private army. There were a number of similar groups in Germany such as the Communist Red Front and the Nationalist Stahlhelm. The SA protected Nazi meetings and engaged in streetfighting with the rival groups.

- In 1931 Ernst Röhm took over leadership of the SA, gave it a distinctive brown uniform and began to organise it as a rival to the German army. Membership rose from 100,000 in 1931 to 400,000 in 1932 and 2 million by 1933.
- The SA engaged in violent brawling with the communists during the elections of the 1930s. Once Hitler came to power, SA members were incorporated into the police by Göring and they played a major role in intimidating opposition during the election campaign of March 1933.
- While the SA was very useful when it came to violent acts against opponents, once Hitler came to power the organisation presented him with a number of problems. Firstly, once in power Hitler had no further need for the mob violence and street tactics of the SA. Indeed, it now suited Hitler to show the German people that he could restore order. Secondly, while Röhm and his supporters wanted the SA to take over the role of the German army, Hitler had no such aim and was more concerned with winning the support of the conservative army leadership. Thirdly, Röhm took seriously many of the socialist elements of the Nazi programme. Once again, Hitler was much more concerned with winning the support of conservative elements by reassuring them that there would be no radical socialist reform. The result of this stand-off was the Night of the Long Knives when, on 30 June 1934, Röhm and hundreds of his supporters were ruthlessly murdered.
- Following the Night of the Long Knives, the SA was quickly supplanted by the SS and went on to play a much less significant role within the Nazi Party. Many of its members transferred to the army. Others continued to play a role at party rallies. One area where SA thugs could continue to indulge their taste for violence was in spreading anti-semitism and instigating attacks on Germany's Jews.

### The SS – *Schutzstaffel*

Formed in 1925 as a small personal bodyguard for Adolf Hitler, the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, Elite Guard), would eventually become the dominant organisation within the Nazi Party. Made up of the most ideologically committed party members, it would be especially responsible for security, the terror campaign against

opponents and the implementation of Nazi racial policies.

- In the late 1920s, when it served as Hitler's personal bodyguard, the SS was numerically insignificant compared with the SA.
- Himmler took over leadership of the SS in 1929. He began to develop it as both a personal empire and the most powerful organisation within the Nazi movement. Its expansion is evident in the membership: 1929 – 280; 1933 – 52,000; 1939 – 240,000.
- In 1933, along with the SA, SS members were incorporated into the state police and joined in the intimidation of political opponents in the period before the March 1933 elections.
- In 1934 the SS led the assault on the SA leadership during the Night of the Long Knives. Thus, it was the SS which was strongly committed to Hitler and his nationalist/racist ideology, that allowed Hitler to eliminate any threat from the SA, a more loosely disciplined group whose leadership had threatened to pursue more radical socialist goals.
- During 1933 and 1934 the SS quickly accumulated an enormous amount of power, gaining control over the police and setting up the concentration camp system. The SS was principally responsible for state security, the intelligence services, the secret police and, ultimately, the implementation of the Final Solution against Europe's Jews.
- In 1939 the *Waffen* SS was created. It was a military wing of the SS that would grow to 39 divisions during the war and rivalled the power of the German army.

#### SS Organisation

*Reichsführer* SS – Heinrich Himmler

SD      *Sicherheitsdienst*  
Security Service

Gestapo      Secret Police

TV      *Totenkopfverbände*  
Deaths Head Units: concentration  
& death camp guards

*Waffen* SS      Military Units:  
fought in World War II

*Einsatzgruppen* Action Squads:  
formed in 1939 to eliminate  
Jews in occupied territories

SS organisation was complex and overlapping. This table is a simplified version.

## Concentration Camps

Throughout March 1933 reports appeared in the press of thousands being arrested across Germany in a police round-up of communists. Because the regular prisons were overcrowded, a system of concentration camps was established to hold the prisoners. Nothing was done to hide what was occurring – quite the opposite. The official line accompanying newspaper reports was that the government was responding to a major crisis, the very real threat of a communist uprising. It was an interpretation the public was quite prepared to accept: that the Nazis were concerned mainly with upholding law and order. As for ordinary law abiding Germans, there was little prospect of any of them ever being thrown into a concentration camp.

Press reports of the early concentration camps indicated that they provided inmates with a plentiful supply of food, hard but healthy work, plus time for sport and relaxation. The key idea was that they were intended as re-education centres, places where fellow Germans who had been misled into following communism could be rehabilitated.

By 1936, the character of the camps had changed. By then, most of the original inmates had been released – having been detained only for a matter of weeks, at most a year. Press reports give the impression of the camps now being filled with habitual criminals along with depraved individuals, including Jews, who were accused of crimes of a sexual nature. Their detention appealed to a public keen on getting crime off the streets.

## Opposition to Nazism

Even though the Nazis were remarkably successful in consolidating their hold over German society, there was some opposition from a number of quarters:

### Socialists

- On 23 March 1934 the Social Democrats were the only party to vote against the Enabling Act. Party leader, Otto Wells, made a speech in defence of the principles of humanity, justice, freedom and socialism. While this was a brave gesture, the Social Democrats could do little to oppose the Nazis. By mid-1933 the party and its once powerful trade union support base had been abolished and many socialist leaders were in concentration camps or had fled the country. All that was left was a loose network that gathered information on conditions within Nazi Germany. One of the phenomena it reported on was the fact that working class support shifted to the Nazis as the economy improved.

- The Communist Party did not have the chance to vote on the Enabling Act because its Reichstag deputies were arrested or forced into hiding. Communists bore the brunt of the Nazi terror campaign and their influence was quickly eliminated. This enhanced support for the Nazis within conservative and middle class circles. Underground communist cells, such as the *Rote Kapelle* (Red Orchestra), were able to operate into the war years but with little impact.

### Youth

What dissent there was amongst German youth dates from about 1937, when pressure to join the Hitler Youth was increasing. Four categories of young dissidents can be identified:

- the *Blasen*: anti-authority youth gangs drawn mainly from the very lowest levels of society. These gangs had existed before the assumption of power by the Nazis and had always resented authority. They continued to commit petty crime and sometimes became involved in confrontations with Hitler Youth, whom they despised for being out of touch with their lower-class subculture.
- the *Meuten*: youth gangs operating in eastern Germany. They drew their membership mainly from the blue-collar working class and tended to display left-wing sympathies.
- the *Edelweisspiraten*: youth gangs operating in western Germany whose members were drawn from the working and lower-middle class. It seems their dislike of the Hitler Youth had much to do with its leadership positions being filled by the sons of the social elite.
- the Swing Youth: teenagers from a mainly wealthy social background who attended exclusive clubs and shared an interest in the latest fads from Britain and the United States, especially swing and jazz music. They simply attempted to avoid contact with the Hitler Youth because they found it far too restrictive and extremely boring.

These various dissidents were little motivated by idealism and their activities represented no significant danger to Nazi rule. On the other hand, in the late 1930s a group of mainly medical students in Munich began to come together to form what would be known as the White Rose resistance movement. In 1943 a number of its members, including brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl, were executed for handing out anti-Nazi leaflets. Even though their efforts had little impact, they are remembered as heroes of the German resistance to Nazism.

### The Churches

In 1933, 90% of Germans were Christian, either Catholic or Protestant. This gave the Churches enormous potential to use their moral authority against the Nazis. In practice, while there were many examples of individual bravery and protest by priests and pastors, the institutional churches did little to effectively resist Hitler.

- On 20 July 1933 the Catholic Church signed a Concordat with the new Nazi regime. It guaranteed German Catholics the freedom to practise their religion but it also appeared to give Hitler Church approval and respectability.
- In 1937 Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical, *Mit Brennender Sorge* (With Deep Anxiety), which protested about Nazi violations of the Concordat. It had little impact. Pius XI's successor, Pius XII, has been criticised by some historians for subsequently failing to publicly condemn Nazi racial policies and the implementation of the Final Solution.
- Within Germany Cardinal Clemens von Galen did criticise Nazi racial policies and, in 1941, he condemned the euthanasia of the mentally ill. The fact that this protest brought a halt to the euthanasia program suggests that senior Catholic Church leaders had considerable influence had they used it in a concerted way.
- Hitler attempted to deal with the Protestant churches by bringing them all under the umbrella of a Reich Church. In July 1933 Ludwig Muller, a nationalist and anti-semitic, was installed as Reich bishop of this church. While more than half of Germany's Protestant pastors conformed to Hitler's design for a nationalist church, Pastor Martin Niemöller led 7000 pastors to break away and form a new Confessional Church. The Confessional Church asserted Christian values over Nazi doctrines. Many of the leaders of the Confessional Church were then subject to Nazi harassment and terror. Niemöller was arrested in 1937 and spent most of the time between then and 1945 in prison. Another prominent Confessional Church leader, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was associated with conservative resistance circles. He was arrested in 1943 and executed in April 1945.

### Conservatives

Representatives of Germany's old right conservative classes had played a crucial role in allowing Hitler to become Chancellor. Their confidence in being able to control him was quickly undermined as Hitler outmanoeuvred the conservatives even though there were only three Nazis in his first cabinet.

- There were occasional protests. For example, the conservative Vice Chancellor Franz von Papen made a speech in 1934 against Nazi excesses but this was ignored and, like many conservatives, Papen compromised himself by continuing to accept appointments from Hitler.
- Some conservatives took a more principled stand and spent the Nazi period involved with a small conservative resistance movement. For example, Carl Goerdeler resigned as mayor of Leipzig in 1936 and was subsequently associated with the July 1944 plot against Hitler. He was arrested and executed in 1945.

### The Army

The German army was the one institution in Germany that retained the power to move against Hitler; army officers eventually led the July 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler. However, like the conservative classes as a whole, the bulk of the army leadership reached an early compromise with the Nazi regime.

- The army's acceptance of Nazi violence, clearly revealed in the Night of the Long Knives, was an early indication that the generals were willing to condone terror as long as it was used against the left or in the interests of 'strong government'. In the meantime, of course, Hitler had outlined a program of rearmament and military expansion that appealed to the army.
- Swearing an oath of personal allegiance to Hitler further compromised the army's potential for independent action. Moreover, while many older officers remained contemptuous of Hitler, some became loyalists and younger officers entering the expanding army were often Nazi supporters. At the same time, the SS, made up of fanatical Nazis, quickly grew to become a rival military power to the army.
- Despite the general acceptance of Hitler, the only significant opposition to Hitler came from within the ranks of the German military. Admiral Canaris was at the centre of an opposition group within the military intelligence service, *Abwehr*. General Beck, Chief of Staff from 1935-1938, was a leader of the resistance group that formed around the conservative Kreisau Circle and went on to carry out the 1944 bomb plot.
- Even though the small army resistance group maintained a network up until 1944, it had a very limited impact. Beck and others in the Kreisau Circle sought to stop Hitler's aggressive foreign policy in the late 1930s but they were undermined by the British and French policy of appeasement and Hitler's dramatic successes in regaining

territory. The July 1944 bomb plot was the only time that a move against the Nazi regime came close to succeeding. Some historians have suggested that it was a desperate nationalist move, motivated by a desire to avoid the consequences of military defeat for Germany rather than a revulsion for Nazi policies.

There has been debate amongst historians about the significance of opposition to Nazism. Clearly, the opposition was ineffective. It could be argued that this is because the actual extent of any opposition was really very limited. A number of reasons can be suggested for this:

- The Nazis were ruthless in quickly targetting other groups, such as the communists, which might have challenged their position. At the same time, conservatives who had hoped to manipulate Hitler were outmanoeuvred. Thus, in a very short time, the Nazis eliminated most rival power centres and imposed a security network that would make it very difficult for others to organise.
- Opposition groups were small, disorganised and lacking in both leadership and any outside support. Moreover, they were often in two minds. How could they move against Hitler when they supported some of his policies? How could a replacement government be organised? When was a good time to move, especially given that Hitler, for many, appeared to be providing good government? Was it not better to try to reach a compromise with the regime?
- Overwhelmingly, it can be argued, opposition was limited simply because Hitler had enormous support in Germany. This was evident in election figures before he became Chancellor. Subsequently, his popularity was enhanced by economic improvement, foreign policy successes and, for many, the impression of apparently stable government and decisive leadership. Even amongst conservatives, army generals and church leaders, all of whom were in a position to challenge Hitler, there was widespread support for Hitler's anti-communism, militarisation and nationalistic foreign policy. Attitudes towards Nazi anti-semitism ranged from active support to indifference.

## SOCIAL & CULTURAL LIFE IN THE NAZI STATE

### The Transformation of Cultural Life

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler referred to the *Entartung*, 'degeneration', of German culture. 'Theatre, art, literature, cinema, press', he wrote, 'must be cleansed of all manifestations of our rotting world and placed in the service of a moral, political and cultural idea.' As with so many other things that had gone wrong, in Hitler's opinion the cause of this state of affairs was the influence of the Jews. The evidence of this 'degeneration' that particularly came to his mind was modern, especially abstract, art. In a speech he made to the September 1934 Nuremberg Rally he referred to 'the corrupters of art' and declared there was no place for modernist art in a Nazi Germany. On Hitler's order, the *Aryan* ideal to be followed was the classical style of the ancient Greeks.

As part of the 'co-ordination' process, Goebbels was also given responsibility for culture, with the aim of achieving conformity to Nazi criteria. To implement the desired control:

- Goebbels established the Reich Chamber of Culture consisting of seven separate branches for literature, press, radio, theatre, music, film and visual arts. To practise one's profession as an artist, actor, composer, musician, journalist, etc., membership of one of these was compulsory. Surprisingly, at first, no formal bans were placed on Jews although membership could be, and was, denied on the vague grounds of 'unsuitability'. Goebbels left no doubt as to what was expected when he told the Chamber of Culture on 7 February 1934 that 'a Jewish contemporary in general [was] unsuitable to administer Germany's cultural assets'.
- From 1935 members had to provide 'certification of Aryan heritage' not only for themselves but also their spouses.
- From April 1938 membership renewal depended on the provision of a 'certificate of political good conduct' from the Nazi Party. The Gestapo could also be called upon to investigate the political reliability of members.
- The Cinema Law of 16 February 1934 imposed 'positive' censorship with the intention of encouraging 'good' films. Before filming could commence, the approval of Goebbels' Ministry was needed. Typically this involved submitting the script for examination. Before being screened, completed films needed to be officially classified.

But, because it was presumed blatant propaganda would drive away audiences, the type of films his Ministry produced varied. Approximately half were love stories or comedies and a quarter were drama. To achieve maximum impact, blatantly propagandistic movies were kept to a minimum. It was more usual to endorse approved behaviour with subtle story lines.

### The Hitler Youth

A German youth movement had begun back in 1901, drawing support mainly from the Protestant middle-class. Its members felt misunderstood by parents and were dissatisfied with modernisation in the form of industrialisation. They enjoyed getting away from home, hiking and camping in the countryside. Following World War I the trend was continued with numerous youth groups being established, most associated with the anti-democratic extremes of politics – hostile to Weimar's republican system of government because of how it originated in military defeat and its association with the humiliating Treaty of Versailles. Increasingly, their members were dressed in military uniforms and drilled.

In 1922 the Nazi Party formed its own Youth League – renamed the Hitler Youth in 1926. Initially, like the rest of the Party, its members came mainly from the working class – but, over time, they would be drawn increasingly from the middle-class, and teenagers with an affluent background and better education were more likely to be appointed to leadership positions. By 1933 there were over 100,000 Hitler Youth.

After the Nazis assumed power, all other youth groups were gradually closed down. According to the Law on the Hitler Youth of 1 December 1936: 'All German young people, apart from being educated at home and at school, will be educated in the Hitler Youth physically, intellectually and morally in the spirit of National Socialism to serve the nation and the community'. In theory, membership remained voluntary. However, the pressure to join was considerable. For example, pupils who were not members of the Hitler Youth were denied university entrance and trade apprenticeships. Finally, membership was made compulsory by a law of 25 March 1939, which stated: 'all adolescents from age 10 to 18 are obliged to put in service in the Hitler Youth'. By 1939, according to official records, 98.1 percent of German youth were registered members. To further ensure participation, the Youth Ordinance of March 1939 provided for police detention of those who missed three meetings – to be held in gaol for an entire



Sunday, on a diet of bread and water. The Hitler Youth had established its own internal surveillance service in July 1934, the HJ-*Streifendienst* or SRD – units of which would roam public places searching for its own delinquent members, who could be handed over to the regular courts.

In its final form the Hitler Youth comprised:

- the German Young People (DJ) for boys aged 10 to 14;
- the Hitler Youth (HJ) for boys 14 to 18;
- the Young Maidens' League (JM) for girls 10 to 14; and
- the League of German Maidens (BDM) for girls 14 to 18.

On 2 December 1938 Hitler publicly declared: 'After these youths have entered our organizations at age ten ... we shall under no circumstances return them into the hands of our old champions of class and social standing, but instead place them immediately in the Party or the Labor Front, the SA or SS ... And then the Wehrmacht will take them over for further treatment ... And thus they will never be free again, for the rest of their lives'.

Boys generally found the types of activities that the Hitler Youth conducted to be extremely exciting. Typically they had a strongly militaristic component. Map reading skills were developed as a part of locating rival HJ detachments designated to be the enemy. 'War games' were conducted between rival detachments. Instruction in the use of guns was frequent. A preferred sport was boxing. There were also 'tests of courage' – such as young boys being required to jump into water, even if they could not swim, and climb steep ravines without proper equipment. Whilst on camping expeditions, marching songs invoked the idea of fighting and death. Such expeditions were often conducted into border regions, such as those opposite Poland and Denmark, where in the past German territorial expansion had occurred.

As an extension of the increasingly racist school curriculum, all members of the Hitler Youth received indoctrination in Nazi ideology. Repeated emphasis was given to German racial supremacy, along with warnings about the threat posed by inferior races, in particular Slavs, Gypsies and Jews. (The BDM particularly warned its girls of the dangers supposedly involved in being examined by Jewish doctors.)

In his 2004 publication *Hitler Youth*, Professor Michael Kater describes Nazi Germany as being 'a martial society where the entire youth culture was

systematically contaminated with concepts of intolerance and oppression of the physically weak and hatred against those who were of a different "race", – declaring that 'the hallmark of HJ socialization was militarisation, with a view to a war of expansion'.

## Women in Nazi Germany

For young girls, the League of German Maidens (BDM) only ever existed as a subordinate branch of the all-male HJ. When their first leader, Trude Mohr, was appointed in June 1934, she gave the girls of the BDM the motto: 'Don't talk, don't debate, live a Nationalist Socialist life in discipline, composure and comradeship!'. This accorded with the male chauvinist attitudes of Hitler and the extended all-male leadership of the Nazi Party – with women being afforded only passive roles in society. Typical BDM activities were rhythmical gymnastics and softball. Much BDM-instruction involved home making and the raising of children. Hitler told the 1936 Nuremberg Rally: 'motherhood is woman's supreme function, and a woman can make no greater contribution to the nation than the birth of several children'. Following that Party Rally, 900 BDM girls returned home pregnant – and in 1937 the BDM was forbidden to organise any more camping trips! Perhaps this was an indication that Nazi activities still had to take account of traditional conservative moral values.

Much of Nazi policy in regard to women was about the preservation of traditional roles rather than any major transformation. This was summed up in the slogan *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (Children, Kitchen, Church), used to define women's role in the Nazi state. It was a romanticised, backward looking view that was attractive to many Germans, both men and women. Under the Nazis:

- Divorce was discouraged and abortion made illegal.
- In 1933 large numbers of women in the public service were forced out of the workforce. Women were also discouraged from joining the professions.
- Various awards and financial incentives were put in place to encourage women to stay at home and produce large families.

Looking at the role of women, as one example, we can see that there is some difficulty in assessing the real impact of Nazi efforts to transform Germany:

- Under the Nazis the birth rate did rise (from 14.7/1000 in 1933 to 19.6/1000 in 1938) but this may have had as much to do with improved economic conditions as Nazi policy.

- Similarly, even though divorce was discouraged, the divorce rate was generally above the 1933 level throughout the 1930s. A complicating factor here is that some divorces were a result of Nazi racial policy, with some 'Aryan Germans' divorcing their Jewish partners.
- Finally, even though Nazi ideology discouraged women from taking paid work, an economy functioning at full capacity continued to draw women into the workforce. There was a 50% increase in the number employed in industry between 1933 and 1939. By then, almost 90% of single and 36% of married women were engaged in some type of work. The pressure to ignore Nazi ideology would become even greater once war broke out in 1939.

### Religion in Nazi Germany

Germany was a Christian nation. In 1933, 62.7% belonged to one or other of 28 Protestant churches and 32.4% were Catholics. With the intention of commanding the total loyalty of all Germans, together with an ideology that was inhumane and barbaric in intent, the Nazis constituted a fundamental threat to the Christian religion. Yet, in general, the major Christian churches would be quite accommodating towards the Nazi government. Their priority was to safeguard their existence as religious institutions.

The German Protestant churches had a centuries-long tradition of close co-operation with authoritarian governments and were quite happy in 1933 when the Nazis came to power. By contrast, in 1930 the Catholic Church had warned its followers against becoming members of the Nazi Party. But the ban was lifted in March 1933, following a promise by Hitler of favourable treatment. A concordat then negotiated between Nazi Germany and the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Pius XI, was published on 20 July. It began with the statement that its purpose was 'to consolidate and enhance existing friendly relations'.

In 1936 and again in 1937 the inhabitants of small Catholic rural communities demonstrated the potential for successful opposition to certain of the regime's policies. Their concerted protests against the removal of crucifixes from local Catholic schools produced a back down by Nazi officials. Yet no official church protests would be made: in April 1933, when the government co-ordinated the boycott of Jewish businesses; in September 1935, when the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws were introduced; or in November 1938, when almost 100 Jews were killed during the violence of *Kristallnacht*. The heads of the Christian

Churches chose to turn a blind eye to these public demonstrations of Nazi racism.

There were individual clergymen brave enough to voice opposition to the Nazis, but at the risk of being interrogated by the Gestapo and imprisoned.

The only Christians prepared to stand up to the Nazis as a group were the Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1933 they numbered approximately 25,000. Because they would not conform, refusing such things as giving the Hitler salute, taking oaths or participating in Nazi-approved organisations, they were outlawed in June 1933. But at least 10,000 ignored the ban to continue 'missionary service'. In 1936-7, they even distributed leaflets informing the public of the criminal nature of the regime. From 1935 the Nazis responded by sending Jehovah's Witnesses to prison. Eventually, approximately 10,000 were imprisoned, 2000 of whom were placed in concentration camps, but even there they continued to practise their religion and to seek to convert other inmates. It is estimated 1200 died as a result of the harsh treatment they received.

### NAZI RACIAL POLICY

#### Aryan Birth Rate

During the 1920s there was some concern at Germany's falling birth rate. When they came to power the Nazis were determined to increase the birth rate of *Aryans* by encouraging families which were *kinderreich*, 'rich in children' – ideally with four children or more. (At the same time, the Nazis intended that Jewish families would not have children, this being one of the ways they would decline in numbers.) A range of incentives was available to *Aryan* couples:

- The June 1933 Marriage Loan Scheme provided for loans for the purchase of household items such as furniture. For each child born the loan was reduced by a quarter, and was cancelled altogether with a fourth child.
- *Kinderreich* families received discounts for the cost of public transport, water, gas and electricity.

#### Eugenics & Euthanasia

'Eugenics' is the name given to the study of how the human race can be improved through selective breeding. Before the Nazis came along, professionals in various countries had been supporting such schemes. For example, some favoured health workers compiling data enabling the identification of persons with biologically undesirable characteristics rendering them a burden on society. Eugenicists believed this

information should then be used by public health officials to determine if particular couples could marry and have children, or if certain individuals should be sterilised. From eugenicists the Nazis got the idea for their Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny, introduced on 14 July 1933. It resulted in the sterilisation of more than 300,000 Germans because of their physical and other abnormalities – whom the Nazis designated 'life unworthy of life'.

In September 1939 a euthanasia program was commenced to arrange for the 'mercy killing' of such persons. It was known as 'T4' because operations were directed from premises at number 4 Tiergartenstrasse in Berlin. T4 would eventually arrange the killing of at least 140,000, including 6000 children. T4 also pioneered the use of gas for mass killings, the main technique later used in the extermination camps to kill Jews. Some T4 personnel would also be transferred to work in the extermination camps. The ultimate Nazi aim was to create a racially pure, strong and healthy, *Volksgemeinschaft* that excluded both racial enemies and the handicapped.

### Anti-Semitism

The chief racial enemy was the Jew and Nazi racial policy is remembered mainly for its anti-Semitism:

- Jews were designated *Volksfeind*, 'racial-enemies', needing to be excluded.
- One of the first things this idea produced when the Nazis came to power was an 'Aryanization' campaign. Supposedly, all property rightfully belonged to the 'national community' and hence intimidation was used to force Jews to close their businesses or sell them to *Aryans* at prices well below their true value. Those with money to invest seized the opportunity. When the Nazis came to power Jews operated 100,000 businesses; this number had been reduced by more than two-thirds by 1938. Then, on 12 November 1938, it was made law that retail businesses could no longer be operated by Jews but had to be transferred to *Aryans*.
- Another consequence of the use of officially approved intimidation was emigration. While 525,000 Jews were living in Germany in 1933, by October 1941 only 165,000 mainly elderly Jews would be living out an isolated existence in Germany.
- The speed of this exodus accelerated as a consequence of *Kristallnacht*, the 'Night of Broken Glass' of 9/10 November 1938, when Nazi-organised attacks resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred Jews plus the looting or destruction

of about 7000 Jewish businesses and the burning down of every synagogue. This happened publicly, for all to see, and practically nobody came forward to help the victims. Ordinary Germans believed they had benefited from other aspects of Nazi rule and came to accept Nazi racist policies as also being necessary.

- Having been effectively isolated, the Jews were too few in number to resist the increasingly more radical persecution organised by the regime.

### Jewish Population of Germany

1933	525,000
1938	355,000
1939	185,000
1941	165,000

### The Gestapo & Nazi Race Laws

The September 1935 Nuremberg Laws classed as a criminal offence 'race defilement', that is sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews, and many charges were to be laid on the basis of such alleged behaviour. In terms of the law, Jews could be charged with 'an attack on German blood' and non-Jews with 'treason against German blood'.

Relying upon its own resources, however, the regime's prospects of effectively enforcing such a law were poor. The responsible government agency was the Secret State Police, the Gestapo, a branch of the SS. But the Gestapo's resources were very limited: it had a maximum of 15,500 officers in the field to supervise a population in excess of 69 million. At best there was possibly only one Gestapo officer for every 4500 Germans. If it relied solely on its officers, the Gestapo could have mounted very little effective surveillance. Consequently, the Gestapo depended very much on 'denunciations', reports made voluntarily by the public. This is how at least 80% of cases it handled originated. In short, an important component of the regime's anti-Semitic policies was effective only because of the willingness of individual Germans to co-operate.

### The Policy of Anti-Semitism

The Nazi policy of anti-semitism gives rise to a number of questions about its nature and origins:

- Why did Hitler develop anti-semitism and how did it become such an important component of Nazi ideology?
- Did most Germans support anti-semitism or only a small core of fanatical Nazis?
- Was the practice of anti-semitism in the period 1933-1939 part of a planned build up to the 'Final Solution' attempted during the second world war?

While each question provokes complex debate, the following points may suggest areas for discussion:

- Anti-semitism had a long history in Europe, dating back to early Christian persecution of Jews.
- In the late 19th and early 20th centuries anti-semitism may have increased because of a perception that Jews rose to prominence in newly industrialised and liberalised societies. In other words, Jews seemed to fare well in the 'modern' world and this created envy.
- In times of economic hardship and political turmoil the Jews could be targetted as a scapegoats by populist politicians to explain away complex problems.
- In Vienna, where Hitler spent his youth, anti-semitism was particularly strong and Jews were used as scapegoats by politicians. Hitler absorbed these relatively simple prejudices and developed them into his own 'world view', which was also influenced by the bitterness of German defeat in World War I, primitive theories about 'race struggle' and an 'anti-modernist' outlook.
- While there was anti-semitism in Germany, it was nowhere near as strong as elsewhere in central Europe. Indeed, Germany's Jewish population was assimilated and strongly 'German' in culture. Even in the troubled Weimar Republic, the electorate was not very influenced by scapegoating of the Jews.
- Once the Nazis came to power, pressure for action against the Jews came from some leaders and more fanatical followers. Some historians suggest that these actions were haphazard, perhaps part of the Nazi Party's need for continuous radical action. The Final Solution developed out of this radical dynamic.
- Other historians highlight what was for Hitler and his most committed followers a compelling ideology: Jews were 'modern' rather than 'German'; they supported liberalism or communism, both alien to German nationalism; they were outside the *Aryan* racial community but intent on corrupting it. From such a belief, the Final Solution was seen as a necessity.
- Only Hitler and a small group believed in the ideology. However, they were assisted by many collaborators, who had a range of pragmatic motivations. And, while most Germans could claim ignorance of the worst aspects of anti-semitism, very many were guilty of indifference in the face of what they did witness, particularly in the period 1933-1939.

### Practice of Anti-Semitism: 1933-1939

- 1933** – As soon as Hitler becomes Chancellor attacks on Jews and their property by Nazi groups intensify.
- April: a one-day boycott of Jewish businesses is declared.
- 1935** – 15 Sept: Nuremberg Laws proclaimed Reich Citizenship Law withdraws Jewish citizenship and political rights; Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour forbids marriage or sexual relations between Jews and *Aryans*.
- Dec: All Jews are dismissed from the public service.
- 1935-1937** Even though discrimination continues and severe restrictions are imposed on all activity by Jews, acts of violence are partly contained by the German public's desire for good order and the desire to create a good impression internationally during the 1936 Berlin Olympics.
- 1938** – March: *Anschluss* – Germany occupies Austria and Austrian Jews are subject to discrimination and large scale violence.
- June: 1500 German Jews are placed in concentration camps.
  - August: all Jews are forced to add either Israel (male) or Sarah (female) to their name.
  - Sept: Jewish doctors are forbidden to treat non-Jewish patients.
  - 9/10 Nov: *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night) – in a night of violence orchestrated by Goebbels, Jewish homes, synagogues and businesses are attacked. Up to 100 are killed and more than 20,000 imprisoned.
  - Nov: Jewish children are expelled from German schools.
  - Nov: All Jewish businesses are forced to be sold at low prices.
- 1939** – Jan: In a *Reichstag* speech Hitler declares that if war comes it will result in 'the destruction of the Jewish race in Europe'.
- Sept: A curfew is imposed on Jews.
  - With the invasion of Poland, its large Jewish population is subjected to violence and the Nazis begin the process of concentrating Jews in ghettos.

## 4. NAZI FOREIGN POLICY

### FOREIGN POLICY TO 1939

#### Aims

Nazi foreign policy had three broad aims:

- A priority was the overthrow of the Versailles Treaty and all of the restrictions it had placed on Germany such as disarmament, restrictions on the size of the German army and a demilitarised Rhineland.
- There was then a broad nationalist agenda which aimed at restoring Germany's status as a great power. It involved rearmament, expansion of the German army, the recovery of lost territory, inclusion of all ethnic Germans in the one Reich and the securing of both markets and raw materials for the German economy.
- Finally, there was the goal of securing *Lebensraum* (living space) for the German master race that was destined to expand into middle and eastern Europe. This goal was associated with Nazi racial ideology, which envisaged a crusade against both communism and 'lesser races'.

#### Strategies

Foreign policy was one area in which Hitler took a keen interest. It is possible to discern a number of strategies that he used in pursuing his foreign policy goals:

- Firstly, as soon as he assumed power, Hitler took steps to ensure that army leaders were aware of his broad nationalist goals. This not only ensured their support but began the process through which the German army would rearm and expand so that, within a relatively short time, Germany would be secure and Hitler would have a strong army with which to carry out his foreign policy.
- In the early 1930s, while Germany was still militarily weak, Hitler was careful to present himself as a man of peace who was only making reasonable demands in his nation's interest. This not only added to his popularity at home but exploited the view, particularly in Britain, that Germany had been dealt with harshly by the Versailles Treaty and now deserved to have some adjustments made. Thus, Hitler could point to the results of the 1935 Saar plebiscite, when 90% of the population voted to rejoin Germany, to show that it was reasonable to demand that ethnic

Germans be reunited with Germany. He could justify re-armament by arguing that other powers had not disarmed after World War I and now Germany was entitled to look after its own security. The Rhineland could be reoccupied in 1936 because, obviously, it was German territory.

- While the German foreign office and its career diplomats continued to work on German foreign policy throughout the 1930s, Hitler's personal involvement in major issues was critical. He brought to the task a number of qualities that, it could be argued, gave him a considerable advantage over western leaders until 1939. He was self-confident and each success gave him greater faith in his own judgement. He was willing to take risks for high stakes. He was totally unscrupulous, willing to make agreements without any intention of sticking to them. Thus, while the British and French policy of appeasement – giving in to reasonable demands to avoid conflict – may have been a good response to an orthodox statesman, it simply fed Hitler's appetite, gave him easy gains and led to further demands.
- Hitler's cynical approach to international agreements meant that he could sign any agreement, even if it appeared to contradict his long term goals, as long as it offered a short term advantage. Thus:

- In 1934, while Germany was weak, Hitler signed a ten-year Non-Aggression Pact with Poland. This offered Germany some protection from the east while it rearmed and also undermined France's security agreement with Poland. In 1939 Hitler attacked Poland.

- In 1939 a similar agreement was signed with the USSR because Hitler wanted to ensure that he would not be attacked from both east and west when he invaded Poland. Within two years Germany would attack the USSR.

- The Rome-Berlin Treaty, signed in 1936 and evolving into an alliance in 1939, was treated by Hitler with more respect because it involved association with another fascist leader, Italy's Mussolini. In practical terms it drew Italy away from the western powers and gave Hitler an important ally when confronting western leaders.

#### Major Events

Hitler was successful in carrying out his foreign policy goals in the 1930s. He succeeded in destroying the Versailles Treaty, recovering territory lost to Germany after World War I and bringing neighbouring ethnic Germans into the new Reich. His invasion of Poland

in 1939 signalled his expansion into Eastern Europe and it marked the outbreak of World War II.

- In 1933 Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations and its Disarmament Conference. His justification was that other powers had not disarmed to Germany's level after World War I. It was a sign that he intended to move quickly in challenging the Versailles Treaty.
- In 1935, with a similar justification, he announced German rearmament and an increase in the size of the armed forces, overturning specific clauses in the Versailles Treaty. This move prompted the Stresa Conference, where Britain, France and Italy met to consider a response. However, the response of the victors of World War I was ineffective. Italy, itself a fascist dictatorship, would soon be a German ally. Britain saw some justification for Germany's wish to revise the harsh Versailles Treaty. It subsequently signed an Anglo-German Naval Agreement that allowed the Germans to build a fleet 35% the size of Britain's navy. While France was most concerned with any growth in German power it was unwilling to act without Britain.
- In 1936 Hitler ordered the German army into the demilitarised Rhineland. At the time the German army would have been too weak to resist a determined response from Britain and France. No such response came and Hitler's gamble paid off.
- In March 1938, after years of Nazi agitation and interference in Austrian affairs, the German army marched into Austria and it was incorporated into Hitler's Reich. This *Anschluss* was essentially peaceful (apart from its impact on the Jewish population and anti-Nazi groups) and had considerable support within Austria. Once again, the western powers failed to respond effectively. On the other hand, Germany gained enormous advantage in terms of Austrian resources and manpower and a strategic position in central Europe that prepared the way for the next move.
- No sooner had Austria been incorporated than, Nazi agitation increased in the Sudetenland. This was an area around the borders of Czechoslovakia with a high population of ethnic Germans. Hitler threatened invasion if the Sudetenland was not ceded to Germany. The ensuing crisis culminated in a conference at Munich in September 1938. In attendance were Hitler, the Italian leader Mussolini (by now a German ally), British Prime Minister Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Daladier. Desperate to avoid war and clinging to a policy of appeasement, Chamberlain and Daladier agreed to

Hitler's demands. The Czechs were given no option but to cede the Sudetenland. This not only stripped Czechoslovakia of valuable resources but left it defenceless against any future German moves. An important consequence of the Munich Agreement was that Hitler formed the impression that the western powers had no will to oppose him. The Russians, who had been attempting to form a security agreement with Britain and France against Germany, formed the same view and this contributed to their later signing a non-aggression pact with Germany.

- In March 1939, cynically ignoring guarantees given at Munich, Hitler occupied the rest of the Czech state. The most important consequence was that Britain and France finally realised the futility of appeasing Hitler. In a belated attempt to stop Hitler in his program of expansion, Britain and France offered a security guarantee to Poland, promising to come to its aid should it be attacked by Germany.
- Undeterred by Britain and France's offer of support for Poland, Hitler began to prepare for an invasion. However, even though he was confident that the western powers would not go to war over Poland, he took the precaution of signing a non-aggression pact with the USSR prior to launching the attack on Poland on 1 September 1939. This ensured that when Britain and France did declare war on Germany it was not also faced with attack from the USSR and a difficult war on two fronts.

## Appeasement

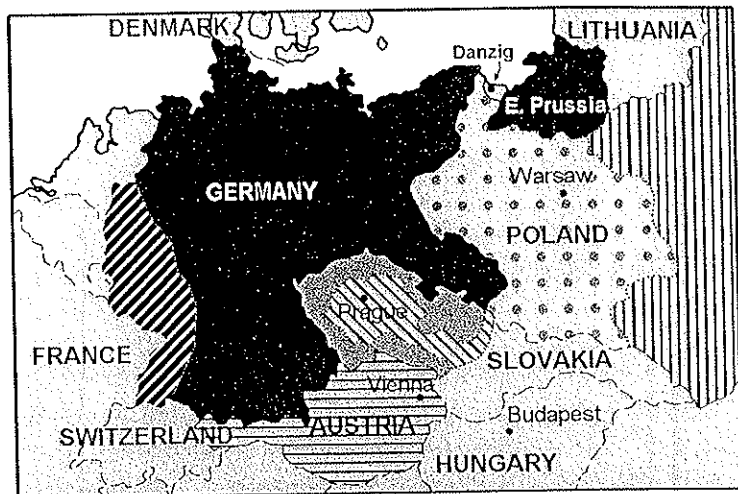
In hindsight, there is no doubt that Hitler was assisted in carrying out his foreign policy aims by the British and French policy of appeasement. After all, had he been challenged as early as 1936, when the German army was weak, he could have been stopped and his own confidence and credibility at home severely undermined. However, it is important to understand some of the complex reasons for appeasement:

- Appeasement sought to avoid conflict by giving in to Hitler's reasonable demands. Especially in the early 1930s, Hitler's demands did not appear to be totally unreasonable.
- Less than a generation removed from World War I and sometimes veterans of the trenches themselves, many of the western leaders had a horror of war and saw the priority being to avoid another conflict at all costs. As leaders of democratic nations they also had to take account of the widespread support for pacifism amongst their people. (Hitler, it should be noted, served in the trenches but did not come away with a horror of war. Also, while there was



## GERMAN EXPANSION IN THE LATE 1930s

1936, Rhineland remilitarised by Germany	
1938 (March), annexation of Austria	
1938 (September), the Sudetenland ceded to Germany after the Munich Conference	
1939 (March), Germany annexes the Czech areas of Bohemia and Moravia	
1939 (Sept.), Germany invades western Poland	
1939 (September), USSR annexes areas of eastern Europe, in accord with Nazi-Soviet Pact	



Map 2.2 German expansion in the late 1930s

## German Foreign Policy 1933-1939

Key Event	Detail	Implications
<b>1933</b> Germany withdrew from the League of Nations.	Hitler's excuse for leaving the League was that other powers had not disarmed to Germany's level.	Japan also left the League in 1933. In hindsight this was the beginning of the descent into World War II.
<b>1935</b> The Saar rejoins Germany. (See map 2.1)	Separated from Germany after World War I, 90% of residents of this area on the French border voted to rejoin Germany.	This was a confidence boost to Hitler in his quest to unravel the Versailles Treaty and, with the result of the vote, seemed reasonable.
<b>1935</b> Hitler announced rearmament and reintroduced conscription.	Rearmament had been happening in secret for some time. Now the German armed forces would be greatly expanded.	With rapid expansion and modern weapons, the German army would soon be the strongest in Europe.
<b>1936</b> The German army marched into the Rhineland.	The remilitarisation of the Rhineland was in defiance of the Versailles Treaty and a challenge to Britain and France.	British & French acceptance of this action gave Hitler enormous confidence for future moves and increased his popularity in Germany.
<b>1938 (March)</b> <i>Anschluss</i> : Austria was incorporated into Germany.	While the incorporation of Austria was seemingly peaceful, it followed years of Nazi interference in Austrian affairs.	Acquisition of Austria gave Germany increased manpower & resources and an improved strategic position in the middle of Europe.
<b>1938 (Sept.)</b> Czechoslovakia was forced to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany.	Hitler claimed the Sudetenland because it had an ethnic German population. Hoping to appease him, Britain & France forced the Czechs to hand over the area.	Again, Hitler gained resources and strategic advantage at no cost. His popularity at home soared. He formed the view that Britain and France would not oppose further moves.
<b>1939 (Mar.)</b> Hitler took over the remains of the Czech state.	This was an aggressive move in defiance of the Munich Agreement under which the Czechs had given up the Sudetenland.	Britain & France finally dropped their policy of appeasement and offered Poland a guarantee of help in the event of German aggression.
<b>1939 (Aug.)</b> Germany and the USSR signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact.	The USSR and Germany agreed to a non-aggression pact for ten years.	The Russians sought security from German expansion by signing a treaty of friendship. Hitler sought to avoid Russian involvement when he attacked Poland.
<b>1939 (Sept.)</b> Germany invaded Poland.	This was a clear act of aggression. Hitler was now going well beyond dismantling the Versailles Treaty and had embarked on a policy of territorial expansion.	The invasion of Poland marked the beginning of World War II when Britain and France acted upon their guarantee to Poland and declared war on Germany.

No

The 'structuralist' interpretation argues that German foreign policy was similar to that of other nations in being the outcome of complex factors. For example:

- like all nations, Germany searched for advantage and reacted to opportunities,
- in the early 1930s Hitler's nationalist rhetoric and actions helped to consolidate his position and ensure popularity but they may have produced a foreign policy that developed a dynamic of its own,
- Hitler's strong position by 1939 owed much to economic recovery but this created a demand for resources and territorial expansion became necessary in order to guarantee resources.

Yes

The 'intentionalist' interpretation argues that German foreign policy was closely linked to Hitler's beliefs and Nazi Party ideology. As such, German foreign policy more or less flowed from Hitler's plans. For example:

- he announced his ideology and plans in *Mein Kampf* and in numerous speeches,
- on coming to power he quickly set about implementing preparations and plans that would see his policies put into action,
- events show that he attempted to do exactly what he said he would do.

*Was Nazi  
foreign policy  
driven by  
ideology?*

Hitler was a German nationalist. His goals were similar to those of any German statesman. This is why he was supported by army leaders, industrialists and other conservatives. He was simply far more successful than anyone expected.

Hitler was not a traditional German statesman. While he was flexible in practice, he was also ruthlessly committed to beliefs that went well beyond traditional German nationalist aims. Nazi foreign policy was uniquely linked to Hitler and his beliefs.

Germany's foreign policy was not subject to a blueprint but, like the foreign policies of all nations, reacted to events. Thus, for example, Hitler took advantage of Britain and France's policy of appeasement in 1938 to make rapid gains.

While Hitler's 1939 pact with the USSR is a good example of his flexibility, within two years he launched an attack on the USSR at a time when his position in Europe was secure. This demonstrates his unwavering commitment to anti-communism and the pursuit of *lebensraum* in the east.

In the long view, Hitler's foreign policy was playing out a process begun with Bismarck and carried on by Kaiser Wilhelm II – Germany had emerged as a military and economic powerhouse in the middle of Europe and its leaders operated under a compulsion to see its influence expand to maximum potential.

A consolidation of ethnic Germans, the pursuit of *lebensraum*, a contempt for Slavic races and a fanatical commitment to the 'Final Solution' were integral to German territorial expansion under Hitler. Thus, Nazi racial ideology had an overwhelmingly new influence on foreign policy.

considerable support for pacifism in Germany, Hitler won backing for his expansionist foreign policy at home by presenting his people with some spectacular 'bloodless victories' in the 1930s.)

- In Britain, in particular, there was a feeling that Germany had been dealt with harshly by the Versailles Treaty and allowing Hitler to remove some of its provisions might actually remove a cause for conflict.
- As Germany's neighbour on the continent of Europe, France was always more concerned with the German threat than Britain. However, France was always reluctant to act without the support of Britain. Moreover, in the 1930s French decision making was hampered by political turmoil and a military strategy that had become very defensive. (At the same time, Germany had strong government and its military was developing a highly effective offensive strategy.)
- By the late 1930s the western powers faced the added complication that by now Germany appeared to have rearmed with modern weapons. In Britain, especially, there was a view that appeasement was necessary in order to buy time for the country to catch up to Germany.

## IDEOLOGY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Professor Richard Bessel begins his 2004 publication *Nazism and War* with the statement 'Nazism was inseparable from war', going on to argue that Germany had come to be ruled by 'an ideologically driven regime whose goal was unlimited expansion and the racial restructuring of the European continent through war'.

Yet regardless of whether it was led by a racist in the form of an Adolf Hitler or by someone else, post-World War I Germany would eventually have challenged the 1919 Versailles peace settlement. All Germans felt badly wronged, longing for the resurgence of their nation and the resumption of its lost territory. As A. J. P. Taylor highlighted in his controversial 1961 book *The Origins of the Second World War*, much of Hitler's foreign policy was that of a traditional German statesman: challenging Versailles, restoring Germany's status as a great power, remilitarising the Rhineland and claiming territory inhabited by ethnic Germans.

However, once German troops occupied the remnant Czech state – containing no German speakers – on 15 March 1939, Hitler ceased following a traditional nationalist policy. Clearly he had embarked on the revolutionary course outlined in *Mein Kampf* – a foreign policy pursuing racial objectives:

- He believed races such as the Germanic *Aryans* and the Slavs were constantly involved in a struggle for dominance and survival.
- It was necessary for a race to have *Lebensraum*, 'living space'. This would provide natural resources to be exploited for economic expansion and the space in which a growing population could establish new settlements.
- The *Aryans* were particularly in need of 'living space' because they had insufficient agricultural land within Germany's existing borders. This had been starkly demonstrated by the British naval blockade of Germany during World War I that severely weakened its population, producing malnutrition and deaths.

Hitler had vague notions of Britain being a natural ally of Germany. But his main focus was on eastern Europe – he wanted to acquire territory there which was inhabited by the Slavs, and that would mean having to go to war, eventually with Russia. But war was not to be feared: it brought out the best in men. Hitler himself had served with some distinction in the German Army on the Western Front during World War I, describing it as 'the most memorable period of my life'. Furthermore, Hitler believed a war against Russia was quite winnable because its Communist Party included many Jews who would undermine its leadership and ability to resist a German invasion.

Throughout his life this basic foreign policy direction never changed. Nevertheless, Hitler was very flexible in his execution and timing. That explains why, in order to reduce the possible international complications when he launched an attack on Poland, he had no problems signing a non-aggression pact with the USSR on 24 August 1939. He entered into the pact despite having spent all his previous political life viciously denouncing communist USSR.

Attached to the non-aggression pact was a secret section providing for the 'resettlement' of so-called 'ethnic Germans', those with some type of German relationship perhaps stretching back many generations – for their transfer from the Soviet Union and the states it controlled, to the Nazi sphere of influence. This provides evidence of how racial considerations were integral to the conduct of Nazi foreign policy. From mid-October the agreement with Russia would see the arrival of ethnic Germans in western Poland – the first of an intended 500,000. A speech Hitler delivered to the *Reichstag* on 6 October contained a reference to 'a far-sighted ordering of European life to carrying out resettlements'. The next day Hitler added to SS leader Heinrich Himmler's duties that of Reich Commissioner

for the Consolidation of German Nationhood with responsibility to implement an 'ethnic new order'.

The most significant aspect of this 'new order' would be the policy of genocide carried out against Europe's Jewish population. The fact that this policy was carried out throughout Nazi occupied territory, for the duration of the Second World War and regardless of other wartime priorities, suggests that ideology had a critical impact on Nazi foreign policy.

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